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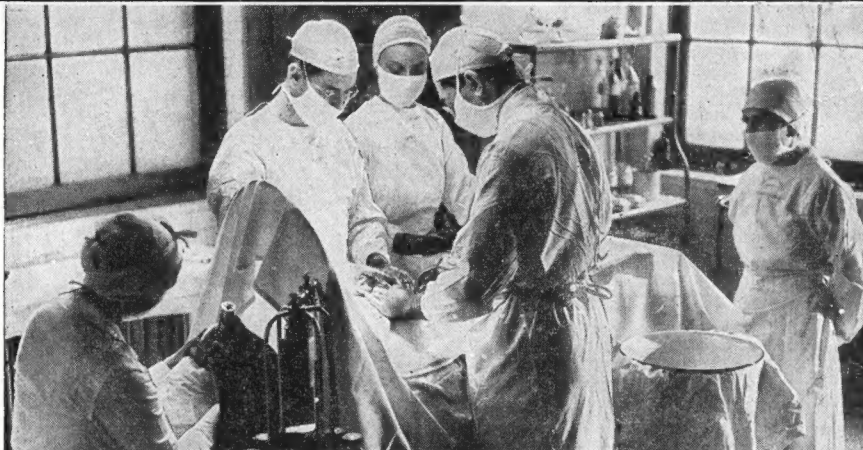
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**MERCHANT
OF VENGEANCE**
by Glenn Low



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10-STORY DETECTIVE

MAGAZINE

ALL STAR
ALL DIFFERENT

Vol. XII

April, 1946

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Merchant of Vengeance

By Glenn Low



Dynamic Detective Novelet

CHAPTER I

SHE should have been busy in the kitchen filling the cookie jar or baking pies for the Sunday company. Her faded print dress and tie-around apron were strictly out of place there on the midnight street. She was the motherly housewifey type. Tommy Slawter, private investigator, instantly liked her round, dimpled face with its wide-set blue eyes. It was not until she clutched his arm that he saw the fear, the awful dread buried in that nice face, sheeted in those honest eyes.

"I know you," she said. There was muffled desperation in her voice. "You're the detective, Mr. Tommy Slawter."

He nodded. "That's right. I'm Tommy

Slawter. But I'm catching this bus home. I got no time—"

The bus started to move. Everybody else had got on. In a second the driver would close the doors.

She clung to him, reluctant to let him go. "Please. Please don't let him kill my boy!"

"Sorry," he said, breaking her hold on his arm. He was swinging into the bus when she said:

"The man in there. You'll know him. Please stop him. Please—"

"What's eating the old lady?" the driver asked as Slawter paid his fare. "Wacky maybe?"

"Don't know," Slawter said. "Queer one, though." It was then he really became aware of the rolled page of news-

A *Detective Tommy Slawter was hungry for revenge when he finally caught up with his devilish enemy. But after he followed that fiend to a fear-haunted cafe, Tommy forgot that he who sups with Satan needs a long spoon.* **B**



paper sticking in his overcoat pocket. The old lady had put it there, just as he'd pried her hand off his arm.

"When a guy gets his mug splattered all over the front page of a newspaper," the driver was saying, grinning prophetically, "he can expect—"

Slawter didn't let him finish. "That picture was a mistake. The guy who stymied that express truck stickup was not I. The paper will correct the error and run the right pic in the next edition."

The driver's face fell with disappointment. Slawter went back and sat down.

The bulldog edition had run a picture of him over a story about some un-

named citizen who had cracked down on a pair of hoodlums holding up an express truck. He'd phoned the paper and righted the error, but it had probably been the front-page spread with his picture that had drawn the old lady to him. She'd been suffering from hysteria, he didn't doubt.

He told himself that he should have let his bus go, given her more time. But he was in a hurry to get home and to bed. He hadn't had a decent night's rest in weeks.

Nerves. High blood pressure. Anxiety. Her eyes had said those things. She hadn't appeared as a person who was involved in a scrape. Remembering that

she'd said there was a man on this bus, a man he knew, a man who was going to kill her son, he gave the faces around him a good look.

She'd been mistaken, of course. There was no face there familiar to him. Unless—There was a face just now turning his way, just now revolving slowly. Then it found his direction. For a moment its eyes slowly brushed his. He felt he'd been drenched in cold phlegm.

ALL RIGHT, he had the creeps. And he knew why. It was because he'd seen the face before, under horrifying circumstances. But where had he seen it? When? Why did he remember it like that? With a hard tingle at his fingertips? With a spongy thickness in his throat?

The face belonged to a little guy—a little guy who seemed concocted solely of legs and arms. Slawter thought if it weren't for his clothes there would be no body there, only a knot of hinges where his limbs joined on. His face was big, flat and loose, with eyes that looked like they'd been screwed in. It was a pale, grey face without a neck.

Maybe it was a picture he'd seen and was remembering? Maybe he'd never seen the likes of that living face before. Maybe it was an ugly bit of nightmare lingering over into reality—a goblin's face from some bad dream?

Only the icy barbs stabbing Slawter's spine said, "No!"

"No, you've seen him before! Don't you remember?" It was the voice of the black throb that pulsed his memory shouting at him, questioning. But he couldn't remember. Not just then.

He was watching when the little man unfolded a newspaper and spread it over his gourd-like chest, gobbling its edges in his pale, hairy hands, and began peering into it. He was like some outcast gnome then, little, slack and humped.

The bus was slowing down for Bixland Avenue at the end of the run when suddenly the crooked one lowered the paper and looked over it at Slawter. Just his face showed, framed against the black drop of the night-filled window behind him. Just his big, flabby face with its thumbbed-in eyes.

Slawter choked back a gasp. His fingertips stopped tingling. The ice in his back turned to fire. Because right

then he remembered. He'd seen that face staring down at him from a trapeze over at Comet Park.

Later he'd seen it again. . . The chimney pots! The hard, blue-lipped moon behind the slow-falling snow! Vale! His young bride, soft and beautiful in her white gown! The pale, hairy hands at her throat—Vale's throat, as pale and as delicate ivory as a newly-sprung hawthorne bud. The hard race across the snow-layered roofs. The twisty, silver gleam of the knife in the air. Masser Fane's knife, driving at him, splitting the snowflakes!

He drew a tight breath. The three-year old wound in his chest pulsed with the old ache.

"Thank heaven for this chance," he whispered to the pulse in his hot brain.

Slawter followed Masser Fane off the bus. This wasn't his stop. He lived in an apartment house a dozen blocks back. He'd stayed on the car because, thinking it over, he hadn't wanted to let that kind-faced old lady down. Don't let him kill my boy, she'd said, and like a fool he'd thought her hysterical.

Masser Fane crossed the avenue and entered Jake Romine's Cafe. It was nearly midnight. Jake was preparing to close shop. Nobody was inside except Jake when Fane went in. As Slawter entered, Fane took a stool at the end of the counter. He was closing the door behind him when Jake looked over from where he was counting the day's take at the register and saw Fane.

The crooked one was looking at Jake when Jake looked at him. His slack face didn't alter as their eyes met. But Jake's face did. It quit its usual expression entirely, draining of color. Slowly its mouth sagged, pulling the under lip away. Jake's teeth was a saffron gash against the pastiness of his cheeks.

Slawter took a booth and was looking at the back of Fane's head when he ordered. "Soup," Fane said, and put a long slim umbrella he carried on the counter in front of him.

Jake stared at him a moment, not moving or speaking, then he turned like a blind man and shuffled into the kitchen. Fane took a bag of potato chips from his coat and began munching on them. In a few minutes Jake returned and put down the soup.

"It's turtle. Mock turtle," he said. "It's the only kind I got."

"It'll do," said Fane. Then he laughed. It was a thin thing, that laugh. Like a rusty file ripping into new tin. Slawter had heard it before. It had accompanied the *thwchk* of the knife splitting his breastbone. It sent a web of shivers up his back now.

He glanced at Jake. If he ever saw murder wiggle its black fingers in a man's eyes he saw it do that in Jake's as he listened to that laugh.

"Mock?" said Masser Fane. "Mock turtle?" His words made a question, but he must not have meant them to. "From soup to nuts—to nuts that always turn up after the dishes are all dirty. Thin-shelled nuts, easy to crack." He laughed again. Slawter knew he'd been recognized, that Fane was aware of his purpose.

Fane began sipping his soup. Jake went back to the register. Slawter was thinking, *Condemned murderers are always permitted a last meal. How appropriate that Fane's should consist of mock turtle soup.*

Jake was punching the register open when he saw the detective. He'd been so consumed with Fane's presence that he hadn't seen Slawter come in.

"What for you, Tommy?" he said.

"Coffee," Slawter told him.

He shoved the register shut, turned to the coffee urn and drew the java. He didn't bring it around the counter, but reached the cup across. Slawter stood up to take it.

It was when he sat down again that Fane suddenly stood up, snatched his umbrella off the counter. The next instant there was a ripping sound, and every light in the place went black.

JAKE was coming around the counter as the detective snicked on his flashlight, his hopes for trapping Fane blanketed. The crooked one was gone.

"What—" Jake said, then paused, staring at the floor.

The beam of Slawter's flashlight centered on a man's body crumpled on the floor by the stool where Fane had been seconds ago. Blood sopped his hair and his body had that slack, limp look that comes before the black rigidity sets in. Slawter knelt and turned his head around. This was a youth in his twen-

ties. The face in life had been a handsome one.

Jake came up close, leaned over, then gave an astonished gasp. "Why, it—it ain't him! It ain't Charley Reeball."

"It isn't who?" said Slawter.

"Charley Reeball. The guy what ordered the soup."

"You know the other guy?"

Jake nodded. "A long time ago I met him. I saw him die—I mean, I thought I did. He was hurt. Walked in front of a speeding car, he did. When I got to him he was dead—I mean, I thought he was."

Something afraid, hot and excited in Jake's eyes made Slawter want to quiet him. He said, "Dead men don't walk into restaurants and order soup."

"It was four years ago," Jake went on, licking dry lips rapidly. "Even his hips were crushed. I'd have sworn he was done for."

"Maybe this guy was somebody who looks a lot like your—like Reeball," the detective said. He knew the man who had ordered soup. He couldn't doubt it. Still, did he know how many names Fane had employed in his various blood enterprises? No. Perhaps dozens, every new racket requiring a different one. Jake had known him as Charley Reeball. He and Vale knew him as Masser Fane.

"After the car crushed him his friend threw a slicker over his body," said Jake, his voice hoarse, thoughtful. "It was raining when I pulled the slicker down for a look. I'll never forget how the rain smacked his eyeballs. His eyes were wide open and didn't quiver when the rain smacked in them."

Jake's face was still pale, his lips twitched. Suddenly he leaned closer over the corpse, said, "Who's he? How'd he get in here?"

"He must have come in when the lights went off," Slawter said.

"What happened to the lights?"

"The little guy reached up with his umbrella and jerked loose a socket wire. The short blew the fuse."

"What'll we do with—him?" Jake pointed at the corpse.

"First thing," said the detective, "we'll call a doctor. Then we'll have some light in here, if you can find an extra fuse."

When the doctor arrived he wasn't long in telling them what they already

knew. "He's dead," said the medico. "What happened? There's a wound on his head, but that didn't kill him."

He glanced around the cafe. His eyes came to rest on the bowl of soup. Fane had eaten only a little of it. He picked up the bowl, sniffed its contents; then knelt and stuck his nose close to the dead man's lips. When he stood up his eyes were fastened on Jake's face.

"Did you serve this soup?" he asked.

"Sure, I served it, but not to him." Jake indicated the corpse with a quick nod.

"No?" the doctor said, turning his tone suspiciously.

"No," said Jake. "There was another man here. I served it to him."

"And then he didn't eat it?" The doctor glanced at Slawter.

Slawter said, and his intentions were of the best, "Tell me, doc, could this fellow have walked in here after receiving that crack on the head?"

The doctor hesitated, sizing Slawter up speculatively.

"If it'll help any," said Slawter, "I'm a private detective, name's Tommy Slawter. Sometimes I help out at the bureau."

"I've heard of you," the doctor said. "A prowler almost murdered your wife a few years back, sad case." He wagged his head. "But I'm not handing out information to private eyes, get it. I'll only say this much, this poor boy never took another step after he was slugged. So I'm saying, whether you two like it or not, that he was slugged in here. The police can decide which of you did it."

"Look," said Jake, new concern filling his voice, "Slawter here can tell you I served the soup to another guy. He was here, and—"

"It won't go, Jake," Slawter said. "If there's really poison in that soup, don't count on me. I'm out."

The doctor looked at the detective intently for a moment, then said, "Who said there was poison in the soup?" Then he went back to the phone and called the police.

CHAPTER II

THE soup did contain poison. Jake was arrested for murder. When he babbled that he hadn't sold the young

man any soup, that another man had ordered it, eaten part of it, then shorted the lighting system, and left in the dark, the police didn't listen. They thought he was nuts or trying a new dodge to skip the hot seat. He swore he hadn't put any poison in the soup in the first place, that he didn't have any of the stuff.

That story didn't click, though. Not after a snoopy sergeant of police found a little jar of the lethality stored away in a kitchen cupboard.

They questioned Slawter, too, Plenty. But what could he tell them? The young fellow might have entered the cafe in the dark and eaten some of the soup. It would have been a crazy thing to do, but Slawter couldn't say that it hadn't happened. If Jake was responsible for his death, was the detective obligated to help him out? Besides, if he had corroborated Jake's story would Jake have been any better off? Not one bit.

He'd put poison in the soup—if he had—and a man had died from eating it. The coroner had agreed with the doctor that the blow on the man's head hadn't caused his death. So which man had died couldn't change things for Jake. It was still murder.

Tommy Slawter didn't tell his wife anything about it until after the inquest the next morning, after the medical boys had found the poison and a murder charge had been lodged against Jake. Then Tommy took his time, working over it slowly.

Vale Slawter was in her wheelchair at the table in a little breakfast nook Tommy had rigged up off their kitchen. The place made their three-room apartment more cozy. Two full-sized windows opened southward from the nook, facing on that same open expanse of roofs with their tombstone-like chimneys where Fane had broken Vale's body three years ago during those awful minutes in the snow-filled moonlight.

They'd been living in this same apartment then, an extremely happy couple with only a few days of marriage bliss behind them, when the detective had returned home one night to find Fane, the little monster, scrambling through a window with Vale's unconscious form in his hairy arms. This murderous act was Fane's way of getting revenge for Slawter's help to the police in

cracking a tight little murder racket, with Fane as its master.

What had followed was something Tommy Slawter wanted to forget. That terrible eternity when he'd crawled over the cold roofs, Fane's knife in his chest, slowly approaching Vale's thinly clad, motionless body. He'd thought her dead then. The horror spouted of that belief had never entirely left him.

Days and days afterwards, at the hospital, with Vale reaching back from death's cold pitch to cling to his hand, were now remembered as a long, hideous nightmare. Then, drunk with verging madness, he'd sworn himself as the living instrument for Masser Fane's undoing. And since then, many times, he'd prayed for that privilege.

Now, a few hours ago, he'd let the crooked one slip through his fingers. He'd withdrawn his attention for a moment. The darkness—Fane's consort—had whisked the little murderer away.

Weeks later when Fane had begun to live again, the doctor had said:

"Severe spinal injury, Slawter. She'll never walk again, unless—"

There was a hope! Slim as a strand of the dew-spider's web. But a hope, nevertheless. The doctor had frowned ponderingly. "Sometimes, rarely, a sudden shock will instantly remedy such a condition—"

Tommy Slawter had thought, *A sudden shock for Vale? No! Never! Vale should never be subjected to any kind of shock again. Never!*

Afterwards Vale had shocked him when she'd insisted on returning to the little apartment to live.

"But the place will be a constant reminder," he'd started to protest.

She'd put a finger on his lips, hushing him. "A reminder of your courage only," she'd told him, smiling warmly.

So they'd come back to their little nest, four stories high, with a patch of tarpaper for their front and back yards.

AS THEY sipped their coffee, basking in the winter sunshine made warm by its passing through the breakfast-nook windows, she asked, "Have they identified the young man's body?"

"No," he told her. "They found one thousand dollars in his coat. He was expensively dressed. No tramp about

him. I don't believe he actually ate any of the soup."

"He probably didn't" she said.

"Probably—anything." He shrugged, puzzling it over. Afterwards he told her about Fane, dreading it. "Don't be alarmed, Vale. We've known all along that he was somewhere around. He had to be." He paused, seeking an easy way.

Her soft blue eyes focused on his. He waited for her to pale, but she fooled him. There was a trace of contempt in the quiet smile that clothed her face a moment later. "You've seen Mr. Masser Fane, our old acrobatic friend?" It was a perfect guess. She couldn't have missed.

He nodded. "He was on the midnight bus. That's why I went to the cafe. I had to follow him."

"He poisoned the young man, of course," she said. "Everything is so very simple now."

He shook his head. "No. He couldn't have known the fellow would come in and eat some of the soup."

She was quiet for a time, then said. "I'm glad he escaped you, Tommy."

"I know it," he said. "You've prayed I'd never come to grips with him. You're afraid when I kill him it will hurt me, maybe put me in prison. But it won't. I'll work it so it won't. He isn't worth it. When I crack him it will be in such a way that—"

She took hold his hand. "Let's drop it," she said. "He'll never bother us again. Surely he feels what he has already done to us is vengeance enough."

"I don't know," he said. "Sometimes I dream about him, dream that he came back, came and—"

"Please, Tommy," she begged.

He grinned, patted her hand. Then he told her about the old lady, and went to his overcoat hanging in the hall to bring the piece of newspaper she'd given him.

His overcoat pockets were flat. The roll of news sheet was gone.

"Did you leave your overcoat hanging up front in the cafe?" Vale asked.

He admitted that he had. "Stupid me," he began. "I'm the dumbest guy that ever—"

Vale hushed him with, "It wasn't stupidity, Tommy. It was the excitement of finding him again."

THAT afternoon the smoothest brunette with the softest brown eyes Tommy Slawter had ever seen came into his office. She told him she was Jake Romine's daughter. Her name was Betty.

"I've come to ask you to help father," she said, looking at him with a hurt, little-girl look. It was a look that drew sympathy like a dry sponge draws milk. She was a type to melt a man down, all soft and yummy. Her voice had that huskiness so pleasing to the city-strained ear. Somewhere she'd picked up a touch of southern accent.

Slawter knew she was going to make a tough situation tougher. She immediately went into the reason for her call. When she finished he knew exactly what she wanted of him. Also, he knew she wasn't going to get it.

"All Daddy wants," she said, her soft voice plaintive, "is that you tell the police exactly what happened at the cafe."

He shook his head. "It won't do any good. They'd still hold your father for murder. It might even make things worse."

"How could it make things worse?"

He said, "The little guy who ordered the soup is somewhere. His body is, if he isn't. If the police know there was another guy they'll set up a search for him. It might end up with Jake facing a double murder count."

She could understand that. "Daddy didn't put the poison in the soup," she said tearfully.

"They found some of the stuff in the kitchen," he reminded her.

"It was for cleaning the brass and copper. Daddy told me so."

He kept still. She hadn't seen Jake's face, the murder wiggling in his eyes, when Fane had first entered the cafe. He had.

Her next words made him a little hot under the collar. "If you didn't kill that man, why don't you tell the police the truth?"

"For personal reasons, all outside of murder," he said. "Besides, the truth would complicate matters. The way it is I may be able to clear your father, if he is innocent."

At that moment a completely new thought came swooping in on him, leaving him cold. He was thinking of Vale,

of their many conversations concerning Masser Fane, and wondering if Vale secretly believed that he, in an attempt to even the score with Fane, had slipped the poison in the mock turtle.

A thousand times he'd told her, "When I get Fane it will be in a way that won't backfire. Nobody, not even you, will ever know."

"The only thing that will help Daddy," Betty Romine said, "is for you to tell the police exactly what happened at the cafe."

"What might help him," he said, "is for the dead man to be identified. Maybe Jake didn't even know him."

He lifted the phone off his desk and dialed city morgue. The superintendent answered immediately. Tommy asked if the body had been identified.

"Yes," said the morgue keeper, "the guy's mother was in awhile ago and made positive identification. The body belonged to a guy named Rodney Pell."

Slawter was looking at Betty Romine when he put down the phone. She sat clutching her purse, her face several shades paler. He said, "The corpse in life was a Rodney Pell."

She gave a quick gasp, then dropped her head.

"You knew him?"

She nodded. A quiver was commencing at the corners of her full, pouty lips.

"Did Jake know him?"

"I don't think so," she said.

Suddenly she drew a long breath, as if to relieve the tear-strain that was etching her complexion, and said, "Rodney and I are engaged."

"You known him long?"

"No. We met a week ago at the Comet Park skating rink."

"He had a thousand bucks in his coat. Was he in the habit of carrying around such large amounts?"

"I was to the morgue this morning," she said, dabbing at her pretty face with a hanky that had recently seen other tears. "Daddy asked me to go."

"Then you knew who the corpse was all the time?"

"No," she shook her head. "The dead man is not Rodney."

They talked it over. She couldn't guess why Mrs. Pell had made a wrong identification. "The man isn't anything like Rodney," she said.

WHEN she left Slawter's office she was puzzled, fearful, and constrained. He knew her concern was now as much for the safety of her boy friend as for her father. When she went out he reached in his coat pocket for a cigarette. It was then he found what he thought he'd left in his overcoat—the little roll of newspaper.

He quickly unrolled it, saw that it was a page from the classified section. Midway on the page an inch column ad was encircled by pencil lines. Its heading read, *DON'T KILL YOURSELF.*

Following the heading came this, *Persons contemplating suicide should see me first. I have something that may interest you. Things may not be as bad as they seem now.*

A local phone number followed, then the name, *Dr. Merryway.*

Slawter was re-reading the ad when his phone jangled. He put the receiver to his ear. A voice said, "This is Mrs. Pell speaking."

He drew a deep breath. Now he knew that the old woman who had given him the piece of newspaper and Mrs. Pell were one and the same. He recognized the voice instantly.

"Hello, Mrs. Pell," he said.

She must have recognized his voice, too, because she said, "It's too late now. Why didn't you stop him?"

She didn't give him time to answer, but hung up. He was going to call her back, but when he thumbed down the receiver hook his phone rang again. This time it was Betty Romine. She said:

"I lied about the body at the morgue. It is Rodney's."

He started to ask what kind of ring-around-a-rosie game was this, but she didn't let him. She kept right on talking:

"Sergeant Treckess of Homicide is coming for you. They found a vial of poison down in a crack behind the table of the cafe booth where you sat during the murder. A bus driver has told them he heard Mrs. Pell begging you not to kill her boy. I hope you rotten luck, killer!"

Then she hung up.

Tommy didn't take the elevator down, but went down the stairs. He had to chance running into Sergeant Treckess in the first floor foyer or outside, but luck was with him. Treckess' car was

parked out front, but the sergeant of detectives wasn't in sight.

Slawter lost no time in stopping a cab. Then for a few minutes he had the displeasure of giving due consideration to the pickle he was in.

Treckess knew he had a blood score to settle with the fugitive murderer, Masser Fane. If the sergeant started to believe Jake and found out that Fane had ordered the soup—well, he could see where he and Jake would be swapping places relative to a nice set of steel bars.

He'd directed the cab to the Pell home. He didn't think that Treckess would have a man there to pick him up. Treckess couldn't know that Betty had warned him. He wondered how Betty knew the sergeant was after him, decided that maybe she didn't, that maybe she was lying. It might be that she wanted to see what he'd do, how he'd react to the knowledge that he was wanted for murder. But what she'd said about the bus driver—that must have come from the police.

Jake? He decided that Jake could have planted the vial of poison in the booth. It was a far-fetched possibility but he didn't think that Fane had had time to pull a stunt. Fane had been too busy getting away from the cafe after he'd jerked the socket wires and doused the lights.

The guy up front, a little mutt with a thin head and droopy eyes, was pulling in to the curb. But not in front of the Pell home. Slawter knew the part of town where the Pells lived. This wasn't it by several blocks.

"Anything wrong?" he asked as the driver parked the cab.

The driver turned his head and gazed at him a moment, his eyes all twisty. Then he worked his body around in the seat until his shoulders squared with the detective's. "Plenty's wrong," he said, speaking in a kind of whistling grunt. "I'm going to kill you, copper."

CHAPTER III

TWILIGHT cast the street in shadow, but those shadows hid no one. The block was without movement. They'd stopped at a vacant lot between two warehouses. It was a good enough spot

for a killing. Slawter doubted if anyone would hear the shot.

"Get set for it," the cab driver warned.

He was letting the gun's snout rest on the back of the seat. His eyes said he was blood crazy. Slawter thought, *This will be tough on Vale. Life sure is kicking her plenty.*

"Anything you want to say?" the cabby asked.

Slawter said, "How much they paying you for this?"

"More than you're worth," the cabby said. "More than anybody's worth." Then he said a screwy thing, considering. "Why the hell do you want to live? Why does anybody?"

He was nuts, of course, but that didn't make a bullet from his gun less lethal.

"It's a habit that the human race has got into," Slawter said.

"A rotten habit," said the cabby, his voice slipping to a whisper.

He was nervous, sick with nervousness. Suddenly the detective's capacity for hope went on the increase. He might have a chance if he could keep the guy talking. Someone might come along, something might happen.

So he said, "Sergeant Treckess won't like it, you spoiling his meat like this. He's out to arrest me for murder, you know."

"Sergeant Treckess?" said the cabby, surprised. "Why, ain't you a cop?"

"I'm a private detective, not a cop. Treckess wants me for the Rodney Pell killing."

"Rodney Pell." The little man mused over the name. "Why, he ain't dead. He lost his nerve. He muffed the Useman bump-off. Didn't you know that? So did Georgie Stawse."

Slawter said, "Pell's over at the morgue. He died from eating poison."

The cabby laughed. "Hell, you don't know nothing. The stiff over at the morgue is what's left of Lola Ownmond's latest boy friend. Where you been all your life?"

"I've been busy trying to help a kid named Betty Romine." It was all the detective could think to say. He had to keep on talking. The truth, he knew, was that he'd been busy trying to help out a heel named Tommy Slawter, who, sometimes, had believed himself a smart detective.

"You working for Betty?" asked the

cabby. He asked it fast. For a second his twisty eyes lost some of their insanity.

Slawter nodded. "Her father's in jail charged with murder, but you know all about that."

"Yeah, I know all about that. Jake Romine didn't poison anybody." He slipped off the safety catch on his gun.

Slawter stiffened to catch the hot wad, said, "Betty Romine identified the body at the morgue. She said it belonged to Rodney Pell."

Somehow that was the payoff. The cabby stared at him for a moment, then his little napkin-ring mouth broke into a sickly grin. "What a cute trick," he said, grinning on. He didn't stop grinning as he licked his lips once, all the way around. "Why—" he said, pausing a long time afterwards, "to hell with the doctor."

With that he whipped up the gun, pressed its lips against his right ear, and jerked the trigger.

SLAWTER took time to push the suicide's bloody head down onto the seat, so anyone passing wouldn't be likely to see it, then hurried away from the cab.

Two blocks away he hailed another cab, directed it to the Pell address. He didn't believe Masser Fane had planted this one.

The Pell home was behind a number in the middle of a brick row. The houses were ancient and fronted with vestibule entrances. A big man, wearing a dark caracul overcoat and carrying a cane, was ringing the Pells' doorbell as he paid off the cab. He was slow in getting response and turned to face Slawter as he mounted the steps.

His face was broad, heavy and fat, with eyes that were smothered by thick-lensed glasses.

"It seems no one is at home," he commented, smiling at the detective.

Slawter instantly knew he'd heard the man's voice before. "Should be," he said. He went on and thumbed the bell.

The door opened, and a thin-faced young man peered out. Slawter glanced back at the big man, saw an expression of extreme discomfort on his face.

"Come in, Dr. Merryway," said the youth. He looked at Slawter questioningly. "Well, what do you want?"

He was a nervous guy, all tight and ready to snap. Slawter wondered if this could be Rodney Pell.

Dr. Merryway pushed by him, his monstrous figure blending darkly into the shadows of the hall. "I want to see Mrs. Pell," Slawter said.

"Mother isn't seeing anyone just now," came the reply.

"Tell her who I am and she'll see me. Tell her it's Tommy Slawter come to visit."

"I'll tell her it was some snooper looking for trouble," said the young man. "G'wan, beat it, you!" He banged the door in Slawter's face.

A cab stopped in the street as the detective came back down the steps, and Betty Romine rolled down a rear window.

"Yoo-hoo," she called. "Yoo-hoo, Mr. Slawter!"

He walked over to the cab. Betty pushed open the door and introduced him to Rodney Pell. "That fellow you were just talking to is Rodney's brother," she said.

This time he knew she wasn't kidding. "How does it feel to have a stomach full of poison?" he asked Pell, not hiding the irritation in his voice.

Pell grimaced stubbornly and didn't speak.

Betty said, "Things are different now since I've found Rodney. I promise never to give you a wrong cue again." She gave with a warm smile, moved over. "Get in, Tommy."

He sat down beside her, putting her between him and glum-faced Rodney. "Thanks for tipping me off about Sergeant Treckess."

She smiled softly, mischievously. "Sergeant Treckess is looking for you. I met him on the street, and he wanted to know if you were in your office. But we made up that stuff about the vial of poison being found in the booth at the café."

"That stuff about the bus driver, where'd you pick up that dope?" He guessed he sounded pretty sore, because a hurt look clouded her eyes for a moment.

"Rodney knew his mother talked to you last night. He saw her give you his letter. It's one he wrote when—when this trouble all started."

She looked at Rodney as if she expected him to stop her. He didn't. "You see, Rodney got the idea you'd poisoned

Georgie Stawse. I told him the idea was silly. He said it wasn't. He had newspaper evidence to prove that you had it in for certain members of the gang. Georgie was mixed in with. I just couldn't picture you poisoning anybody. Rodney doped out the story about the vial of poison being found at the café, and I sprung it on you over the phone. We wanted to see if you'd get panicky and run."

Tommy said, "Just who is—was Georgie Stawse?"

Rodney cleared his throat and grudgingly told him. "He was the guy who ran the Comet Park dance hall for Sam Ownmond. He's also the guy who was found dead in the café."

"He was sweet on Ownmond's wife, the Comet Park trick dancer called Lola," Slawter said, using information he'd gleaned from the crazy cabby.

"Some things you do know," said Rodney. "Yes, Lola was playing up to him. It was burning old Sam Ownmond down to watch it, too."

"Ownmond probably poisoned him. Fed him the poison somewhere else, then Stawse came into the café, and—" He stopped. That wouldn't do. Stawse had been slugged inside the café, and died from the poison while he was unconscious.

"He didn't go anywhere after he was slugged," Pell said.

Betty said, "Anyway there was poison in the soup, and Daddy didn't put it there. Besides Sam Ownmond and Lola have been in Florida for over a week."

RIGHT then Tommy was thinking that Mrs. Pell might have given him a letter. A letter might have been rolled inside the piece of newspaper. He distinctly remembered putting the rolled piece of newspaper in his overcoat pocket. Then when he'd found it it had been in his suit coat pocket. He said, "I think I lost the letter Mrs. Pell gave me. I—"

The sudden change in Rodney's face checked him. It was like turning on a light behind a dark curtain. A look of gladness was a flail beating the gloom off his map.

Slawter went on, "I think Jake Romine must have taken it from my coat at the café."

In that second a wilder, sicker gloom moved in and crowded the gladness off

Rodney's face. He said, "You sure the customer who ordered the soup didn't snitch it?"

"He scarcely had time, but he might have," the detective said.

"Mother didn't have any business giving it to you in the first place." Pell was puffed like a little kid.

"She thought differently," Slawter said. "Do you happen to know the fellow who ordered the soup?"

He nodded. "Mr. Romine said it was Charley Reeball."

"Mr. Romine also said that Reeball had been dead for four years." Tommy Slawter's next words were a guess, also maybe a kind of inspiration. "Jake told me he'd smashed this Reeball fellow with a car four years ago and left him for dead. I guess that's why a guy who looked like Reeball turning up at the café kind of knocked him screwy. He's been a hit-and-runner, hiding from the law, and—"

Betty suddenly clutched his arm. "The driver will hear," she whispered.

He then knew his guess had hit the bull's-eye.

"Let him," Slawter said. "There's just one thing going, you two either loosen up and give with a little info', or I tell the police about Jake confessing to a hit-and-run killing."

They were silent a minute, looking at each other. Betty was suddenly palliating. "It was such a dark night, and raining. Daddy didn't see the man until it was too late. He should have reported the— the accident. Brooding over it has nearly driven him crazy." She kept looking at Rodney after that, evidently leaving it up to him whether or not they'd make a spill of it.

Pell squirmed, said, "He might spoil everything if we tell him."

Betty said, a catch in her voice, "I'll leave it up to you, Rodney."

"We'll have to go where we can talk," he said. "Anyway, we're almost to where we hired this cab to take us."

"And where was that?" Slawter asked.

"To your office," said Pell.

"You wanted to see me?"

Betty came in on that. "While we're at it let's all be honor bright about everything. One reason why I told you Treckess wanted you for murder was to get you out of your office, so we could search it for Rodney's letter. When we

saw you just now, we decided to pick you up, if possible, to keep you from talking to Mrs. Pell."

Slawter grinned, said, "Dumb."

"Dumb or not," rejoined Rodney, "we'd decided not to overlook any possibility."

"We can go to Useman's Yellow Bottle Café. There's a neat place for a quiet confab," Slawter said, bringing into play some more of the information he'd got from the suicide-bent cab driver.

Rodney stiffened, his nicely shaped mouth doing the old fear-sag.

"No, not Useman's," said Betty. She clutched Rodney's arm.

"He's stringing us, Betty," Rodney said. "He already knows everything we can tell him."

"If your mother gave me a letter I never read it," the detective said. "Honor bright."

"We'll go to the Empress Lunch," said Betty shakily. She redirected the cab, and that's where they went.

CHAPTER IV

TOMMY followed Betty and Rodney back to a rear booth. They ordered coffee; then began unloading some of the queerest stuff he'd ever heard ladled off the human tongue.

"A few days ago," Rodney began, "I was working for Sam Ownmond at the Comet Park rink as a skating instructor. It was after I fell and hurt my ankle that my troubles began." He paused, toyed with his cup a moment.

"Before I tell you what you seem to want to know, I'd like to know why you are interested in the death at the café. It strikes me you just might be a hireling of Ownmond's."

Slawter told him he was nobody's hireling, that he was interested in the café killing for several reasons, not the least of which was the fact that a hipped taxi driver had come nearly killing him less than an hour ago. He said, "That scrape, I think, stemmed from the café murder. The poor cabby killed himself."

He added that it was enough to interest a fellow when certain parties were out to get his scalp.

That news brought their mouths open and popped their eyes in astonishment. Betty said, "Who was the taxi driver?"

"Did he have a slim face and droopy eyes?" Rodney wanted to know.

"I didn't take time to learn his name," Slawter said. "He had a slim face and droopy eyes. He admitted that he'd been hired to kill me."

Rodney's face was pale, his nice mouth twitching, when he said, "I know him. I met him at Dr. Merryway's clinic." He drew a loose breath, then took up where he'd left himself with an injured leg at the skating rink.

"Dr. Merryway was at the rink when I fell. He examined my leg. Afterwards he gave me an injection, which I thought was unnecessary."

"This Dr. Merryway is the bird who runs an ad in the papers offering to help the mentally depressed?" Slawter said.

Rodney nodded. "He claims to be a psychoanalyst. He manages a clinic over in the Center Building, gives lots of lectures.

"He also used to operate a palmist's booth out at Comet Park," said the detective. At that moment he'd placed Merryway's voice. He'd known it was familiar when he'd heard it at Mrs. Pell's. Merryway had run a fortune-teller's booth at the park under another name. He'd appeared there contemporary with Fane, when the crooked one had been billed as the world's greatest acrobat.

"After he gave me the injection," Rodney went on, "he said it would be wise if I came into the clinic the next day and let one of his specialists look me over. When I went in the specialist told me I had creeping paralysis, adding that he was probably the only doctor around who would be so honest as to tell me the truth. He gave me another injection, then Dr. Merryway talked to me. He warned me against suicide, saying the disease I suffered often caused extreme mental depression, and the sufferer usually became possessed of the urge to kill himself."

Rodney suddenly dropped his head on his arms, resting them on the table for a long minute. Betty began stroking his hair, her eyes sick with concern. She spoke to Slawter. "Since then Rodney has been unable to think of anything else. He'd decided to kill himself when I met him."

"I don't know much about it," said the detective, "but maybe these injections are designed to bring about extreme despondency. It seems I've heard of cer-

tain drugs that have had such effect."

Rodney lifted his head. "That's what I think now, but before I started to wise up—before I met Betty—I thought Dr. Merryway was a kindly psychoanalyst. I tried to believe what he told me."

"What were his lectures about?" asked Slawter.

"About the urge to suicide," said Pell. "He drives just that one idea continually. The idea that there is only one way for a potential suicide to escape the awful urge that is driving him to self-destruction. He explains, carefully, how this urge can be tricked by directing it away from oneself toward others." Rodney paused, a sad, desperate light in his eyes.

"It's an entirely new approach," said Slawter, "to murder—murder by the wholesale." His eyes went cold, his hand on the table worked itself into a granite-like block.

PELL nodded slowly. "He makes it so very convincing, so self-proving. He tries to point out that when such an urge leads to the taking of a life, the act isn't murder, but simply self-preservation. He gives example after example, twisting them all to his own intention—that of establishing in the distraught minds of his hearers that the only way to escape the urge to suicide is to kill."

"And you didn't click according to treatment?" Slawter said.

"No. How did you know?"

"That taxi driver, another of Dr. Merryway's victims, told me."

"Dr. Merryway didn't send anybody out of his lecture room with instructions to kill any certain person. It is only that all who left his clinic left it with the conviction that the only hope for them—their only hope of escaping the suicide urge—was to commit murder. I left there possessed of that idea, but preferring rather to kill myself than any other. The man with the dangling arms influenced me to murder. That was later."

"The man with the dangling arms?" Slawter said, his interest deeply stirred. Masser Fane's hideous, flat face flashed across his memory as he spoke.

"He was a poor little man suffering from creeping paralysis. He'd lost complete use of his arms from the shoulders. They dangled. I met him at the skating rink. He came in at closing time. I was

alone. He told me how dreadfully he'd been abused by the owner of the Yellow Bottle Café, Mr. Brace Useman. Useman, he said, had beaten him. He showed me many deep bruises to prove it. We talked, and finally he offered me one thousand dollars if I'd get even with Useman for him. If I'd poison Useman."

"Tricks. All tricks," said the detective. "There were no bruises. It was certain kinds of pigment, worked into the skin. There were no dangling—" He stopped, took a sup of his coffee that had grown flat and cold, then said, "Go ahead. Tell me all of it."

"He gave me the poison," Rodney continued, his voice a throttled mumble, "and told me how Useman always drank a closing-up drink with any customers in the café. It's a custom of Useman's to do that, and the drinks are on the house. He told me if I'd slip the poison into Useman's glass, that he'd arrange to have the café lights turned out at the right moment. I was to poison Useman's beer in the dark."

"Did you agree?" The detective tasted his coffee again.

"Yes. I was sick. I scarcely knew what I was doing. I'd already written the letter to mother telling her I intended committing suicide. Afterwards I added a little more to it. I took his money and went home."

"I put the money and my letter in mother's purse the next night before I left for Useman's. She found them sooner than I expected. I saw her talking with you at the bus stop right after I left the house. It was right after the man with the dangling arms called on her."

"I guess the reason he came was to make sure of my whereabouts. A newspaper with your picture on the front page was lying on a stand. He saw it and made some remark about you, letting mother know he knew you."

"Tell me what happened at Useman's?" said Slawter.

"When I got there Georgie Stawse and Useman were alone in the café. It was a little before midnight. We three sat down to drink together, but I didn't put any poison in Useman's glass. I kept the stuff, intending to take it myself later."

Slawter believed him. There was a solid certainty within him that told him that Pell was telling the truth.

"The lights went out," Rodney con-

tinued, "and in a minute came on again. A short time after that Stawse said he felt sick, terribly sick. That was after we'd finished our beers. He got up and went out. I left then."

"Why did your mother falsely identify the body at the morgue?" the detective asked.

"To protect me. She thought if she said the body was mine, Merryway and the others would lay off me."

"What did you say in the letter to your mother?"

"The same things I've told you, except that about going to Useman's."

Slawter understood now why Pell didn't want the letter to fall into Jake Romine's hands. He said, "All you've told me doesn't go an inch toward proving that Jake Romine didn't try to poison a customer, and that Georgie Stawse didn't come into his café and eat some of the soup. Unless you did attempt to poison Useman, and Stawse got hold of the poisoned beer."

"I didn't try to poison anybody," Pell said.

After that they were silent, thinking things over. Finally Slawter said, "Sam Ownmond and Brace Useman are friends. Useman could have poisoned Stawse. If you put poison in Useman's glass he could have been prepared for it—your friend of the dangling arms could have fixed that—and switched glasses with Stawse. That way you'd pan out as Stawse's killer."

"But I didn't put any poison in anybody's drink," insisted Pell. "I didn't, but—" He stopped speaking and stared at the detective like a man suddenly gone daft. "Say—say—" he said, licking his lips slowly, a great enlightenment flashing upon his handsome face.

"You've got it," said Tommy Slawter, giving with a bleak grin. "Simple, isn't it?"

Then he excused himself, left them gaping after him, as he went to free himself of a worry that had come into the lunchroom with him. He went into a phone booth and dialed his apartment. He was going to make sure that Vale was okay, then he meant to get hold of Sergeant Treckess and watch the making of some very satisfying arrests.

The voice that finally responded to Slawter's efforts to phone his apartment was not his wife's. It was the operator's.

She said, "There's something wrong at that number. It seems someone has left the receiver down."

He took time to tell Rodney and Betty, "You wait here, I'll get in touch with you a little later," then grabbed his hat and coat and hurried into the street.

SNOW had started falling since they'd gone inside. A thin, dry layer of it covered the sidewalk. He hailed a cab as he reached the curb.

The people over the hall were out. Their entry light was burning. It was always burning when they were out, other times it was turned off. His own door was locked. He fumbled the key in the lock, calling out, "It's I, Vale! Tommy!"

It was silly for him to call out like that, but he thought maybe she'd absent-mindedly left the receiver off the hook and gone to bed. She was extra careful about such things, but he could hope for some innocent neglect like that. It kept him from believing the worst.

The apartment was dark. Vale always left the hall light turned on. She dreaded darkness. The darkness was significant of what was to come.

He switched on the hall light. Listened a moment, heard no sound. He saw that the phone receiver was down and recradled it. Then he called again, "Vale! Vale!"

No answer.

"Oh, Vale, darling! What is it? What's happened?"

He made it fast into the bedroom. The bed was smooth, unmissed. He raced into the living-room. No one there. He ran down the hall, into the kitchen. Stopped.

Her wheelchair. Empty!

A cold breeze touched his face.

The breakfast-nook!" he gasped. The windows . . . The roofs . . .

A breakfast-nook window was open. He was through it in a twinkling, out on the roofs.

The snow was coming down faster now. A nice, dry snow. It layered the roofs thinly. There was a hard, blue-lipped moon overhead.

There were man-tracks in the snow!

He followed them swiftly. The snow made it impossible to see very far ahead—the snow and the uncertain moonlight.

The tracks rounded a chimney, went

on. There was another chimney. A chimney? No! That squat, crouching thing was no chimney!

The knife came again. Just as it had three years ago. Whistling, splitting the snowflakes. He dodged quickly and neatly let it go by. In the next instant he leapt at Masser Fane.

Then he saw Vale, lying crumpled in the snow, a white and dark heap, motionless.

As Fane had sworn, so it was coming to pass. He'd taken oath to come back and finish it—to come again and fling her from the roofs. He'd laughed back at Slawter that other time, laughed while the police poured onto the roof from the apartment windows, arrived in time to drive him off, laughed as he'd used his acrobatic skill to roll off the roof's edge, to slip down the water-spouting to safety.

"I'll come again. I swear it!" he'd called back.

Now he was running again, heading for that same spot at the roof's edge, making for the place where the spouting led downward. Again that laugh drifted back, thin and shrill like the cackle of a screech owl.

"Come on, Slawter," he said. "Come and get me." Then, "I'll come again."

He was scrambling down the water-spouting when Slawter looked over the building's rim. Watching him the detective was forced to remember how he'd seen the little beast perform at Comet Park on the trapeze, how expertly the crooked one had gone through his grisly routine, holding the trapeze with his teeth, swinging back and forth above the crowd, clicking his little body out of joint, legs, arms, hips and shoulders. A gruesome, fascinating sight.

He was getting away again, maybe laving Vale a corpse behind him.

Slawter was no acrobat, so he made no attempt to follow down the spouting. He'd let a bullet do the work for him. His shooting ability, he believed, would favorably compare with any of Fane's fancy gymnastics.

He let the sights of his Police Positive rest a moment, following on the top of Fane's head, and was just ready to squeeze the little monster into eternity, when the moon slid behind a big bank of clouds.

It was as if Tommy'd instantly gone stone blind.

"He'll escape!" the detective cried hoarsely. "Oh, heaven help me, he's beaten me again!"

CHAPTER V

ANYBODY can guess what it sounds like when four stories of tin water-spouting suddenly lets go. It's a ripping, scraping, cracking hell. But when this happened a moment after the fade-out of the moon, Tommy Slawter distinctly heard, above the awful rending noise, the solid thud of Fane's body kissing the sidewalk.

He turned then and rushed back to Vale. Before he reached the spot where she had been, the moon came sailing out from its blind. She was no longer there.

The snow told him the story of her disappearance—her footprints, testifying that she'd risen and walked away. *Walked!* those little footmarks were like an angel's handwriting. The snow that gave their dainty contours such beautiful relief was as heaven's own stationery.

He ran along her tracks, leading back to the apartment, his heartbeats a high chorus of wild joy, his mind returning to what the doctor at the hospital had said. "Sometimes a sudden shock will instantly remedy such a condition."

Vale was not in the breakfast-nook, nor in the kitchen. He rushed into the hall, calling, "Vale! Vale, darling!"

There came no answer.

Downstairs then, onto the sidewalk, racing like a madman. Ahead of him where Fane had fallen a car was parked, a long, shiny car. He ran toward it. As he ran he saw a big man bending over Fane's body.

"Tommy! Tommy, stay back!"

That was Vale's voice. It had come from inside the car. And suddenly slashing at him was a stream of alternating fire. Somebody in the car was pitching hot marbles at him.

He swung into the shadows of the building. The shooting roared on, the force of the shots punching big funnels in the falling snow. He saw the big man whirl and start running toward the car. It was Dr. Merryway. Then Tommy did what he always dreaded to do. He shot a man.

One! Two! It was enough. He'd broken both of Merryway's legs just above the knees. The doctor went down like a

smacked jack-in-the-box, his legs bunching up in front of him.

Slawter glanced at Fane's body, unable to believe his old enemy was out for keeps.

The shooting from the car stopped. Whoever was doing it had seen the doctor fall, saw him now, crawling toward the car.

The doctor called out, his voice spilling pain and panic. "You got him, Brace. Come and help me."

Brace Useman was in the car. He'd trapped the whole bevy at once.

But Useman didn't show. Suddenly Vale appeared at the car, fighting to break a man's grip on her wrists. In another instant she was free and running toward the building.

Useman's voice went after her. "Come back or I'll kill you!"

At that second Slawter opened up again. He shot out the windshield where he guessed Useman's head would be. After that, a moment or two, Useman slid from the car, head first, and tumbled onto the street.

All right, the jig was up.

"Tommy! Ch, Tommy!" Vale called, running toward him. He grabbed her, hugged her hard, buried her face in smothering kisses.

"Tommy," she gasped, "Fane got the Pell boy's letter from me, and—"

"You snitched it from my overcoat!" he cut in. "You was afraid it held something that would lead me to Fane?"

"Yes—Yes, but—"

"Hush," he told her. "I know what was in it. Go inside. Call the police, ask for Sergeant Treckess."

"Fane came for it. He took it from me. Then the others came for it. They didn't know Fane had it. He—"

"Go," he said. "Quickly. Call Sergeant Treckess."

"But, Tommy—"

"I know, darling. But go now."

She went, running, kicking up her little heels to show him how well she could do it.

USEMAN had a slug in his left shoulder and was scared he was dying. Slawter disarmed them both, then helped the doctor into the car and went over to Fane's body.

The little beast was dead. Slawter searched his clothes and found Rodney's

suicide letter. Also he found a driver's license in Fane's billfold with Fane's description on it under the name of Charley Reeball.

Later the doctor told the police how he and Fane had worked a neat little racket on innocent motorists. It had been worked by Fane stepping into the front fender of a moving car, then falling onto the street. They'd always pulled the trick at night. It had been easy for Fane to avoid being hurt, letting the fender merely stub him. When the driver stopped and came back he always found something ugly, because by that time Fane had thrown his joints out of socket—his old acrobatic trick—and was playing dead.

The doctor collected then, promising to remove the body of his associate for a nice, fat sum. Most motorists paid off. Jake Romine had.

Slawter put Rodney's letter in his pocket, then returned to the car. In a few minutes Sergeant Treckess arrived with an ambulance in tow.

Driving to headquarters from the hospital, where Treckess had left a man to guard Merryway and Useman, Slawter told the sergeant everything.

There was no interruption until he came to the place where he gave his theory on how Georgie Stawse was poisoned at Useman's café.

"You say that Stawse poisoned himself?" Treckess asked, doubt rattling his words.

"Yes," Slawter said. "Fane, Merryway, and Useman had it figured to show as murder and suicide. Ownmond had paid them a lot of cash for getting rid of Stawse. It was worth plenty to him to get Stawse off his young wife's mind. Stawse was to be poisoned by Pell, then Pell was to be a suicide. Stawse had been sent to the Yellow Bottle to poison Useman, just as Rodney had. I'll bet all I own that Stawse was told Useman had been squawking to Ownmond about him and little Lola. Stawse had a thousand bucks in his clothes when he died. Also traces of poison were found in his coat pocket."

"You're playing a guessing game," said Treckess bluntly.

Slawter went on. "Stawse poisoned his own beer when the lights went out and passed his glass to Useman. Useman

was ready for it, and worked it so Stawse got his own glass back, when he thought he was getting Useman's. But Pell fooled Useman. He didn't attempt to trade glasses with anybody in the dark. The simple fact that Rodney is still alive proves it."

"It's no good, Slawter," Treckess said. "It's up to you to play it right with your client. The kind of business you're in you've got to. And you're right about the stiff being Stawse, also about Sam Ownmond putting up the dough for the fade. Ownmond's under arrest now at a place in Florida. We identified Stawse's body long before Mrs. Pell tried to snatch her son from the hot seat by saying it was Rodney's. So your best out is to tell me where to find Rodney so I can take him in."

Slawter told about Merryway's suicide clinic, about Fane going to Rodney with his arms out of socket when Rodney was doped and hiring him to poison Useman.

"Don't you see," he said, exasperated, anxious to have this murder business done with and get back to Vale, "Rodney was not hired to kill Stawse, but Useman. Actually, though, Rodney and Stawse were set—it had undoubtedly been fixed that way by Fane—to poison each other. Neither of 'em could have dreamed it might turn out that way."

Treckess nodded. "Sure, I see," he said, his voice cold with doubt. "Rodney was hired to kill Useman, being doped first. But how do you know Stawse was hired to kill anybody?"

"Because," said Slawter, and he should never have said it, "he tried to kill Fane afterwards."

"Fane?" Surprise wiped the doubt from Treckess's voice.

"That's right," Slawter went on. "Stawse left the Yellow Bottle feeling sick, maybe suspecting he'd been poisoned. He passes Jake's place and sees Fane inside eating soup. Then he sees the lights go out. It's a chance. Sick like he is he's beginning to put two and two together. He still has some poison left after poisoning the beer. He goes inside in the dark, puts the poison in the soup, thinking Fane will finish eating it when the lights come on. Then Fane runs into him and smacks him with his umbrella."

Treckess said, "Not bad. Not bad at all—for you." Mockery was in his voice now. "Only last night you didn't mention

that Fane was in Jake's café. Now you're corroborating Jake's story."

"I twisted things a little last night," admitted Slawter. "I was anxious to know if Jake had actually poisoned Fane." He knew it didn't sound good enough. As he said it a thought whipped into his brain that scared him.

TRECKESS said, "It won't do, Temmy. You've been out to crack Fane ever since he crippled your wife. You followed him into Jake's place last night. When the lights went out you slipped the poison in his soup. But he fooled you and beat it in the dark. Then Stawse staggered in, loaded to the gills with beer, and like a drunk will, sat down and ate some of the soup. You tried to stop him from killing himself and bumped him on the head."

As Treckess finished speaking his hand brushed Slawter's sleeve. In the next moment he'd snapped one end of a pair of gemless bracelets on the private detective's wrist.

"Sorry, Tommy, we were only waiting for you to exonerate Jake. We felt sure Fane had been inside the café."

Slawter didn't reply. He was thinking of Vale, thinking what a blow his arrest would be to her. It would be tough, waiting at home for him to come to her, then receive the news that he was in jail, arrested for murder.

Fane was dead, but he'd beaten him after all. The merchant of vengeance had made another blood sale.

A lieutenant of the homicide squad met them in the squad room. "Hello, Tommy," he said, smiling.

Slawter managed to smile back. It

wobbled like hell, but it was a smile. "Hello, Lieutenant."

Treckess was told to remove the handcuffs. Then the lieutenant said, "Tommy, your wife is in the inspector's office waiting to see you. She knew you'd turn up here before you went home." His smile broadened, softened. "It's swell she can walk again, Tommy. It really is."

"Sure, it's mighty swell," Slawter said, but he didn't move.

"Well, go on in to her. What are you standing around here for?" said the lieutenant roughly.

"Give a guy time, will you?" Slawter glared at him. "After all it's not going to be so hot, with all the bad news."

The lieutenant put a hand on his shoulder. "Treckess didn't know," he said. "We just found the suicide in his cab. He'd written a suicide note. Had it in his wallet. The note tells just how Fane, Merryway, and Useman planned to have Stawse and Pell drink a little poison while they thought they were poisoning Useman. It goes on to say that Pell backed out and—"

Tommy Slawter didn't hear any more. He couldn't. He'd closed the door of the inspector's office and was holding his wife close in his arms.

He and Vale read the note later. It was complete in every detail. Betty would get to keep her Rodney after all, and have her father free in the bargain.

Later, after phoning the Empress Lunch and passing the good news along to Rodney and Betty, Vale and Tommy went home—walking every glorious step of the way, walking in the falling snow, holding hands and laughing like a couple of high school ninnies.



A Bullet for the Groom

By William Hellmann

Patrolman Lowden's successful rival in love was on the incoming bus—and that state policeman had orders to greet him with hot-lead congratulations.



CORPORAL PETER LOWDEN ran the little Highway Patrol car up into the parking lot beside the bus station. He placed it where it would not be noticed, but where he could get it promptly if needed in a hurry. He climbed out, stood a moment looking about him in the dark. He was a tall man, heavy-boned, tanned and lean of flesh, clean and neat in his Patrol uniform. He rubbed the palm of his big hand over his face tiredly, but it was a tiredness that no amount of rest could cure. He went around the car, limping slightly, his knee still a little stiff where the shrapnel had plowed into it, and went in through the side door of the station.

The sudden transition into the lights of the station made him squint. He stood a moment until his eyes should adjust themselves, looking over the room. It was not a big place and at this time of night was nearly deserted—only two men waiting for the last bus through. The men looked at him covertly from beneath lowered lashes, hurriedly reviewing their past for a reason why this grim-lipped officer might be looking for them.

"When is the Denver Express due here?" he asked the ticket agent.

"In a half-hour—twelve-fifteen. But it's running late—may be nearer one o'clock." He looked at the patrolman speculatively. "Picking someone off it?"

"Yes—my grandmother," the corporal said curtly. "She robbed a liquor store."

"All right!" the agent said angrily. "You want a favor sometime!"

The corporal went across the room and squatted on a stool before the long, black-topped counter.

"A cup of black and a burger," he told the gray-haired man behind the counter,

without even looking up at his face.

"Hello, Pete," the waiter said. He slapped the patty of meat on the grill, set out the steaming cup of coffee. "You had no call to get snooty with Ted," he observed. "It's against Patrol rules. You ain't a top-kick now."

"All right," Pete said shortly.

"Still luggin' the torch for Janie," Joe said. "I told you before to forget her. She's married to Eddie, now, so forget—"

"You go to hell," Pete said.

"I'm tellin' you. It ain't gettin' you a thing. Sure, she's a nice kid, but just a kid—"

"What do you mean by that crack?" the corporal flared. "She's twenty now, and I'm thirty-four. Fourteen years—is that too much? Better than being married to a rat."

"You ain't got no call to name Eddie a rat, Pete," Joe said reasonably.

"He is a rat!" Pete said savagely. Hate burned deep in his dark eyes. "Know why he's a rat? Because Janie's ma went to Denver where he took her, to see her, and found her starvin' in a hole-in-the-wall."

"Sure. Lots of kids have a tough time at first."

"It's not like that with that rat. He's running with a gang of young hoods, raising hell. And know what else? Janie had a bruise—a big, fat, blue one—under her eye. Eddie gave her that." His jaw set hard. "If I ever get a chance at that rat!" he told no one in particular.

"Okay," Joe said. "So why did she marry him? Because you had to get patriotic and enlist and let her alone for three years. She grew up in those years, Pete. Eddie's handsome and here on the spot with the dough. The rest was pie."

"She liked me, Joe; I know she did. And she was a swell kid—sweet and kind and—and good." He pawed at something that got in his eye. "So she married him and

she's sticking with him. She told her ma that."

"Eddie didn't used to be a rat," Joe said.

"No. When I was on the local force before I joined up, he hung around the station a lot. I nearly killed him one day—wish to heaven now I had!"

"How'd that happen?"

"He stuck his finger in my back and yelled, 'Stick 'em up!' I had my gun on him under my arm before he knew what had happened. It was a trick I'd thought up and practiced until I had it perfect. I recognized his voice a split second before I could pull the trigger. That's all that saved his hide."

"If he'd had a loaded gun, he'd have cut you down before—"

"No. Because he wouldn't be expecting the maneuver. And in the dark—a cinch! When the lead starts hitting him in the belly, he forgets his gun."

"You're a fast man with a gun, Pete," Joe said. "The fastest I ever seen."

FROM far down the road, the long wail of an air-horn signaled the approach of the express. Pete got up quickly.

"Who?" Joe asked.

"A hood that was in on a bank job across the line today. There were three of them, and two got killed. Someone thinks they tagged the other one on this bus." He paused. "Eddie," he said.

Joe's eyebrows went up. "How'd they know who it is?"

"Easy. It was Eddie's mob. Just the three of them. Two's dead. That leaves Eddie."

Joe's eyes flickered. "This is your change, Pete," he said. "Take him alive and he gets a stretch—and Janie waits for him. Plug him and—"

"You go to hell," Pete said again.

Joe grinned nastily. "But he'll be lookin' for that trick play of yours—"

Pete went out into the road. Yes, he thought, Eddie'd be looking for the play if he knew it was me, but he doesn't know. He walked on a little, standing in the shadow where the bus would pass and he could watch it pull in.

It came up, loaded, and slowed for the station. The emergency door in the rear of the bus swung open suddenly. A man dropped out, whirled, and darted into the parking lot. Pete smiled.

Swiftly he went after the fugitive, but

the lot was big and dark, and there were about a dozen cars in it. He saw no one. He walked slowly, carefully, but as he passed a car at the back of the lot, something hard jabbed into his ribs and a chill voice warned harshly:

"Get them up, flatty!"

"All right," Pete said, quick and loud. That was a part of the plan. At the same moment, his hand darted for his holster, then hesitated. He could kill this rat in a split second. But could he? Certainly, he was justified. But this was Janie's husband! And he wanted Janie. And Joe—what had he said? *Shoot him—and you get Janie.* But he didn't need to kill Eddie.

"All right," he said aloud again. He felt his gun being lifted from his holster. He thought, *I'm a fool!* But he preferred it that way.

"Get goin', flatty," Eddie said. He laughed. "Ain't nobody goin' to be lookin' for me in a Patrol car!"

"No," Pete agreed dully. He walked ahead in the thick dark, the gun in his spine. Suddenly he fell forward, down and away, hitting the ground as the gun went off. He thought, *The lousy rat—he's really trying to kill me!*

Pete caught him then, around the legs and jerked hard. The gun went off again as Eddie spilled. He hit the ground hard and lay still.

Feet came pounding across the lot, as men ran toward him. "Pete!" Joe yelled. "Pete, you all right."

"Yes," Pete said. He turned his torch on the silent figure on the ground.

"So you let him have it," Joe said, sucking in his breath.

"No," the corporal said. "I just spilled him. He'll only have a headache." He looked at Joe, then stooped and rolled Eddie over on his back. Only it wasn't Eddie! It was someone Pete had never seen before. "Then—then Eddie must have been one of the two the bank guards got!" he said, amazed.

He handed Joe the flash and the gun. "He's yours until the local boys arrive to take him off your hands. I'll call Chief Burke for you."

"Huh? Whatta you goin' to do?" Joe demanded.

"Gather up Janie's ma and catch the one-thirty express for Denver. Anything wrong with that?" he demanded.

"No," Joe said softly. "Not a single thing, Pete."

Stars Die at Dawn

By Fergus Truslow



Mark Reynard may have been a toxy Hollywood agent, but his glamorous film find, Vanessa, thought she was foxier. With the result that, when that star made an unscheduled appearance at the Pearly Gates, Reynard found himself in a homicide-bounded Terrestrial hell.

PINK light squatted on the mountain tops. All the roosters in the San Fernando Valley crowed lustily. Sitting in my car in front of Johnny Cook's riding stable, I watched Alec Turrentine ride away, and I shivered.

Maybe it was the mean, dangerous set of his shoulders. Maybe it was because the chill dawn mist was just the color of Vanessa's eyes when the first lady of filmdom is plenty sore.

Or maybe it was just that Ol' Brer Mark should've had a couple more shots

of rye back in the Strip to brace his nerves for this job.

Most agents wouldn't have dealt themselves into the total war between Turrentine and Vanessa. But Ol' Brer Mark isn't most agents. I had a lot of new talent on my string, and I wanted to see them get a break. For that, I was sticking my neck out.

Johnny Cook's faded blue eyes followed Turrentine. "I hope you eyeballed them fancy English riding britches and boots," he whispered. "An' that monogrammed cigarette."

Johnny was a wiry, sandy, ex-jock who'd drifted in from Tucson, bought a rundown stable and turned it into one of the Valley's swank academies of the horse.

"Don't let the fancy trimmings fool you," I said grimly. "That guy Turrentine reminds me of a lumberjack's double-bitted axe, honed to an edge you could shave with. I don't know why."

It was probably the barrel chest Turrentine got from his Cherokee grandpa, draped in tweeds by the best tailor in Hollywood. Or the hard black eyes with lids cutting level across them when he stares at you.

"Yeah," Johnny admitted. "I guess Turrentine ain't the human dynamo behind Atlas Films for nothing. You ever hear the story he's a killer? Back in Oklahoma, in the oil fields, I mean. Before he muscled into flickers. They say he knocked off some bird who wanted a piece of oil land he wanted."

"I've heard the story. A whisky bottle full of nitroglycerine, a Ford truck, and a rough country road."

"You believe it?"

I shrugged. But I did believe it. That's why the gruesome hour of five A. M. found me hanging around the riding stable, to see if Turrentine would be riding toward Vanessa's. He was.

I thumbed the starter button of my jalopy.

Johnny went right on rolling a brown Bull Durham smoke, without taking his foot off my running board. "They say Turrentine's putting on a showdown fight with Vanessa at the studios today," he said slowly, his eyes on my face.

"Uh, huh." I yawned, nearly dislocating my jaws. The only way Ol' Brer Mark can make the hour of five A. M. is to stay up all night and cut a trough in some joint out in the Strip.

"I'll bet you get plenty backlash out of it, being her agent," he sympathized.

"I don't mind for me," I shrugged. "I can take care of myself. But it's sure playing hell with a lot of new talent that deserves a break."

"Speakin' of new talent, when you gonna put me in pitchers?"

"What for?" I wanted to know. "Just because you got a little publicity last week for shooting a horse thief in the britches?"

All the L. A. papers had printed pics

of Johnny Cook pointing the old .38 he kept on his desk in the stable office.

Johnny winked at a horse that was looking over a fence at me from ten feet away. The plug had his ears back. He stuck his neck out, pulled back rubber lips, and clicked yellow teeth at me delicately. Like he had my ear and wanted to take little bites to make it last longer.

"How do they know?" I asked, looking at the insolent nag with distaste.

"When a guy is afraid of horses," Johnny informed me, "his skin gives off a different smell, see?"

"I'm not afraid, I've got a phobia. Don't you know what a phobia is?"

Johnny grinned and lit the brown cigarette he'd just rolled. He took his foot off the running board.

"So long, Johnny," I grunted. "I'll see you." Letting the clutch out, I headed for Vanessa's place.

VANESSA'S modern California ranch house sits smack in the middle of an old walnut grove. She wouldn't take out any of the trees, but built the place around them.

The trees scratch on her roof shingles on windy nights and lean over her high white brick walls to dirty up her swimming pool with walnuts and old leaves. But she won't take them out. It's like she won't get rid of anything that's a gift from anybody. She's superstitious enough to keep a gift even if she hates the sight of it.

That's one of my favorite ways of ribbing Vanessa. Giving her things she doesn't like. Ol' Brer Mark never forgets a birthday.

I parked my car in Vanessa's graveled drive. I didn't go up the steps and ring the doorbell. That would mean an argument with Emily Hayden, her secretary. Emily is prim, prissy, and prematurely grey. She doesn't like me.

Instead I walked around the house to the white brick wall by the swimming pool. Over on the other side somebody was gasping and splashing.

"Hey," I called.

The gasping and splashing stopped. "Who's there?" Vanessa's voice wanted to know. Her teeth were chattering a little.

"Me, Ol' Brer Mark."

"Mark, darling! Come on over!"

I did, and got whitewash all over my pants doing it.

"Oh, Mark, it's wonderful. It's so c-cold it burns!"

She wore a two-piece of apple green. In the grey dawn her body was a white shadow in the water, like when a trout turns and flashes.

"You really ought to try it, Mark!" she panted.

"Yeah?" I threw down a cushion off a garden chair, sat cross-legged on it and lit a cigarette.

"Mark!" Her grey eyes blazed at me. "You've come to scold me."

"What makes you think so?"

"I know," she scowled. "When you just sit and smoke and look down your long nose and wiggle your old red eyebrows like a dissolute old fox."

Her wide-lipped mouth pouted at me. She'd piled her hair up on her head, like a little girl does when she gets in the tub. The defiant way she held her chin would break your heart.

"It is about Turrentine, and me producing my own pictures? Mark, is it?"

I shrugged. "You're costing Turrentine money and prestige. He'll break you."

"I have the right to make my own pictures! My contract says so. You negotiated that contract yourself, Mark!"

I winced, burlesquing it. She swore at me. "Well," I grunted, "how could I know you'd use a ouija board to pick scripts and directors?"

"Just because I've had a couple of flops. This time it's going to be different. This picture, the next one—"

I cut in. "Will cost you your last cent if you miss. You've already lost about two-thirds of everything I've piled up for you out of taxes."

SHE laughed and swam across the pool, her lovely shoulders white and shiny wet now. The first coppery light had sifted in among the top leaves of the walnut trees. A small green and brown frog hip-hopped in the wet grass, within arm's reach of me.

"Maybe," I said bitterly, "you're not afraid of Turrentine or of losing your dough. But what about the way you're shoving my new talent behind the eight-ball?"

That was her soft spot—people. "What

do you mean?" she wanted to know.

"I mean I've got three newcomers on my string that look good. They deserve a break. They won't get it. Everybody in Hollywood is scared to death of Turrentine. Because I'm your agent, see?"

It touched her. She looked thoughtful. "Are they any good?"

I shrugged. "One is a kid just out of the Marines. He's got talent. Also, he's been through the mill. He could tell you how Tarawa smelled the third day, if you want to know. Most people don't. They'd rather forget those things now."

"Another of my stable is an old guy with forty years of character parts on the legit stage behind him. And I've got a chick of a girl out of a Midwest tank town who's got what it takes."

"I'll do something for them after I've made this next picture," Vanessa muttered sulkily.

I stubbed out my cigarette on the wet grass.

"You think I'm mean, Mark. And callous. But I'm not."

She took hold of the edge of the pool and looked at me, her grey eyes big and serious. "Mark, you know something? You're in my will. You and Emily Hayden and all the servants."

"Look," I snarled. "Why do you think I came here in the early bright? Just to bat chit-chat back and forth?"

She made big innocent eyes. "You didn't?"

I leveled on her. "Today is the day. You've got to go into a big studio huddle this morning. You'll be looking right down the barrel of all the power Turrentine can line up against you. The chips are down. It's going to be you or him."

"I know how to handle myself."

"Do you? What about that old rumor floating around Hollywood about you having a husband hidden out over in Arizona? Your contract specifically forbids matrimony in any shape or form. The public doesn't want you married."

She told me what the public could do and grinned like a tomboy.

"Just the same," I warned her grimly. "Turrentine's got a club over your head if he can prove you have a husband."

For just a split second she looked scared. Then she scowled. "He can't prove a thing."

"This is a grudge fight. He'd stop at nothing. I have a hunch he's coming over here this morning to try to slap it out of you."

Vanessa's grey eyes narrowed to slits. "You really think he might come here before the studio conference?"

"Yes, I'm sitting in on anything you say. Even if it's only 'good morning'."

"I'm not afraid of Turrentine. I'm not afraid of anything."

Staying up all night makes me mean. "Not anything?" I queried silkily. "Just not anything in the whole wide world?"

I had dropped my hand on the little green and brown frog in the wet grass beside me. In spite of his frantic kicking, I held him firm.

"Mark! What've you got in your hand?" Vanessa said suspiciously.

She backed away from the edge of the pool, treading water. "Mark!" she whimpered. "Mark, no! You haven't got anything in your hand! Not really!"

I opened my hand and showed her. The little frog almost made it. But not quite. Ol' Brer Mark closed his fingers too quick.

A scream froze in Vanessa's throat. You could see it stick there. Her lips drew back from her perfect white teeth in a grin that wasn't a grin.

I threw the little brown and green frog away. It landed with a soft plop in some ferns by the white brick wall. Then I dipped my hand in the pool to wash it off.

"Someday I'm going to tell the columnists," I threatened.

She got her breath, coughed up some water, and began to curse. Anytime she wants to, Vanessa can outswear all the juicers and grips in Hollywood. This was one of the times.

"I need some coffee," I told her. "If your Injun boy-friend shows, look for me in the kitchen."

I WENT through a gate in the wall around the pool, crossed the dew-wet lawn and entered the house by French doors opening on the patio.

Lily, the colored cook, was up and hitting the ball. The fragrance of hot java told me that.

Emily Hayden's prematurely grey head was bent over the morning paper in the breakfast room. I dropped my wet hand on her neck. It felt warm.

She gasped and jumped. "Your hand's as cold as a trout!"

Emily tried to chill me with her flawless eyes. She had on a tailored suit of pink tweed.

"Black coffee, Lily." I winked at the grinning colored cook, and flopped on the circular breakfast seat by the window. "Yep," I told Emily Hayden. "Ol' Brer Mark's been helping Vanessa with her morning swim. Turrentine was thumping the war drums. I thought I'd better be around in case he drops by to put over a fast one."

The one thing in the world Emily Hayden and I agreed on was how dangerous Turrentine could be to Vanessa. A faint line of concern showed on Emily's smooth forehead as she got up from the table. "I'll be in my upstairs office," she said.

I heard her go away. Lily hummed over the kitchen stove. New-minted sunshine came in the breakfast room window and bounced off polished silverware. It hurt Ol' Brer Mark's eyes. I tried the java. It was still too hot.

I must have dozed off. The next thing I knew I was sitting up wide awake with a mouthful of cold coffee, a scream ringing in my ears. Jarred awake by the scream, I'd automatically taken a swig from my cup.

More screams. I choked on the cold coffee and fell over my own feet trying to get out from the circular table.

Emily Hayden's footsteps pounded down hardwood stairs from her office. We crashed into each other in the door to the patio. "Where?" I snapped.

"It's Lily," she said calmly.

We ran out into the dew-drenched patio. The hoarse screaming kept on. It came from behind the white wall around the swimming pool.

We got there. Lily, the colored cook, stood against the open gate, holding herself up with one hand and squeezing her own throat with the other. The screams welled up out of her steadily.

"Lily, stop that!" Emily ordered.

Lily kept right on. Her eyes were shut tight. Her mouth opened so wide with each scream that you could see the pink lining of her throat.

A big white turkish towel lay on the grass at the edge of the pool, where Lily had dropped it. Emily and I saw

it at the same time. "Vanessa!" she gasped.

I got to the pool a step ahead of her.

The water was very clean and clear. You could see Vanessa's body on the bottom at the deep end. Her hair had come loose. It streamed out from her head a little.

A thick ooze of blood streamed out, too. . .

HALF an hour after Vanessa's body had been taken out of the pool, I sat in the big living room and watched a burly plainclothes man scribble in a green notebook. "You admit you was the last person to see her alive, Mr. Reynard?"

"No."

"That's what you said, ain't it? You was out there talking with her while she was swimming."

"That doesn't mean I saw her alive last."

He questioned Emily Hayden briefly without taking his eyes from the green notebook. "Okay," he grunted. "I'll talk to the colored cook now. Bring her in."

They brought Lily in, sobbing and crooning her grief. She'd been with Vanessa from the beginning.

I saw my chance to get out of the house a minute. I wanted a look around that walled garden.

The dew still lay heavy on the grass. The birds had gotten hep to a brand new day, and were singing their heads off. Vanessa's swimming pool lay calm, smooth and innocent, like a blue mirror.

I passed up a big circle of tracks on the wet grass at the edge of the pool. Closer to the white brick wall was a deep heelprint. But it could've been made by one of the cops.

A whiff of acrid smoke tickled my nose. I followed it up. On top the brick wall lay a fuming cigarette butt.

It had almost burned itself away to nothing. Almost. You could still see the gold monogram on the grey ashes. Turrentine's monogram.

The garden wall, on that side, had a high wooden gate, barred on the inside. It led out to the walnut grove and was seldom opened.

Flakes of whitewash lay on the ground underneath the bar of the gate. I lifted the bar and pushed. Hinges groaned.

The tracks of Turrentine's horse stood out plainly on harrowed ground under the walnut trees. Particularly around the wall, where the nag had stood. A shiny place showed on a tree limb where the reins had been tied.

Beyond the walnut grove stretched an apricot orchard. Beyond the apricot orchard I saw the tops of sycamores along one of the flood beds of the Los Angeles River.

I went back in and dropped the bar in place. I did some wondering as I walked through the patio to the house.

From the upstairs windows of Emily Hayden's office you couldn't see the pool, but you could see the part of the wall where the gate was.

IN THE breakfast room the cops were still trying to pry facts out of Lily, and she was still calling on Moses.

I got Emily Hayden's eye. We went into the library. I shut the door. "Look," I said. "How did you happen to miss telling the cops about my hand being cold and wet when I came into the house from the swimming pool?"

Her clear grey eyes were hard as quartz. "I see no reason why I should make things—"

I grabbed her by both her tailored tweed shoulders. "Look," I snarled. "Any time you miss a chance to snipe at Ol' Brer Mark there's a reason. You know something. What is it?"

I gave her a shake. "You're holding out. Tell me, you prissy little Pollyanna, or I'll shake the teeth out of you!"

I went to work on her. As her head snapped back and forth her ashy hair stood up, flopping.

She got enough quick. "Stop!" she choked.

I stopped. "Vanessa didn't sleep here last night," Emily Hayden said calmly.

"How do you know?"

"I heard her come in. Besides, she left her clothes on the floor in her room. I think she went to the riding stable.

"Why?"

"Come to her bedroom and see for yourself."

She led the way and shut the bedroom door behind us. "There," she whispered.

Vanessa always threw her clothes on the floor. Just stood and let things fall.

I sorted the stuff over. An embroidered kerchief she must've tied over her head;

a pair of earrings—little hammered silver frogs with a strand of her golden hair caught in one of the turnscrews; a shirt; an oiled silk windbreaker; silk underwear; tan woolen slacks; and a pair of jodhpur boots.

I looked at the boots carefully. River bottom sand had worked in where the soles met the uppers. Yellow stable straw had stuck to the bottoms of the insteps. They had the stable smell, too.

"What time did she come in?" I asked.

"Just before daylight."

The cops must have given up on Lily about this time. They were trampling around the house, bellowing.

"Get out there and keep them busy," I snapped. "Don't say anything about this, understand?"

Emily Hayden nodded. She'd gone to the mirror and put her hair back in order.

She shut the door. I opened Vanessa's big wardrobe closet. Out of a dozen pairs of slacks on hangers I found one pair with cuffs wet around the edges.

I got down on my knees at her shoe rack. First I tried all the walking shoes, looking at the soles and smelling them.

Women do crazy things. It was a pair of gold sandals without any toes that had the stable smell and the stable straw sticking to them.

I went to the bedroom door and flagged Emily Hayden away from the cops. "Get your purse and gloves," I whispered. "We're going to give these flatfeet the slip."

"Leave them, you mean? But, what for?"

"So we can get over to Johnny Cook's riding stable and nail Turrentine to the cross. You're going to help me!"

WE DROVE over to the riding stable in silence. I didn't open my mouth until my tires began to hiss in the sand along the river bottom road. Johnny Cook's corrals loomed ahead.

"What time is it?" I asked Emily Hayden.

"Six minutes before seven."

"Turrentine will be back any minute now, if your watch is right."

"Of course it's right," she said furiously. "Now will you please tell me what this is all about?"

"I found horse tracks outside the garden wall."

She gasped. "You mean Turrentine came there this morning?"

"Yes. Now listen. What we're going to do is jar an admission out of him. Not that he killed Vanessa or anything. Just that he was there."

"Why don't we tell the police and let them do it?"

I shook my head. "He's big enough to wiggle out of it. But if you catch him unawares, and say you saw him go in that gate through the wall . . ."

"But I didn't!"

"You're going to say you did, and you're going to make it stick. I know Turrentine. If you hustle him he'll just laugh and admit it and defy you to prove it."

"Then how *will* we prove it?"

"I'm going to be listening to the whole thing."

"Oh," she said coldly. "That way."

"Yes, that way." I parked the car and snapped off the ignition as Johnny Cook came to meet us, a grin on his cheerful face.

"One more thing," I whispered. "Not a word to Johnny about Vanessa. Savvy?"

The long hay loft, full of beams and dancing dust motes, had a low ceiling. I could hear the horses down below, rattling their halter chains in the stalls or chewing at the wood of their mangers. Every time one of the sagging, rotten planks of the loft floor cracked underfoot, the sweat popped out on me, under my clothes.

I don't like horses much. They don't like me, either. They can smell my phobia of them.

Emily Hayden's low-pitched voice drifted up from below. "He's coming, Mark," she informed me.

Johnny had told us how Turrentine liked to stable his own nag after riding. It was the farm boy coming out in him.

"I—I'm afraid," she added.

"Don't worry," I assured her. "The minute I hear the payoff, I'll cough and shuffle my feet up here. He'll know there's a witness."

She didn't answer. A minute later I heard spurs clink and Turrentine's booming voice talking to his horse. He broke off suddenly. "What're you doing here?" he grunted.

Emily Hayden answered. "What were you doing riding up to that garden wall this morning?"

Turrentine's hard black eyes would be clashing with Emily's cold grey ones down there.

"Whadda you mean?" Turrentine's deep snarl came back.

Fear keyed Emily's voice a notch higher. "You broke into that garden. She was swimming and you broke in. You killed her!"

"What's the matter with you, you crazy little wren?" Turrentine roared. "Are you reefer happy?"

It took plenty to crack Emily, but Turrentine in an Injun temper did it. She began to gabble hysterically. "I saw you! I was upstairs in my office and looking out! I saw you—"

"Shut up!"

"You did! First you laid your cigarette on the wall and reached over the gate and pulled the bar off. Then you tied your horse and—"

I shuffled my feet and coughed. I coughed good and loud.

Emily stopped.

"Who's up there in that loft?" Turrentine wanted to know. She didn't answer.

"I don't know what kind of a frame this is, sister," he said in a voice like a steel file getting in a few licks on a saw. "I don't get this talk of me killing Vanessa. But I do know you're not going to blackmail me. You or your eaves-dropping pal up there, either.

"I rode up to the wall, yes. I went inside. Sure I did. Then I rode away the way I came. That's all, and you can go to hell!"

A LONG silence followed. I thought they might say something more, so I waited.

I waited too long. It took me a while to tumble to the fact that the show was over and they were gone. It took me some more time to make my way down the creaky length of the hay loft. By then, the old .38 that lay among the grain and feed bills on Johnny's office desk wasn't there any more.

Ol' Brer Mark's pulses pounded away like sixty. The rotten planks of the hay loft floor made him walk like treading on eggshells.

A loose shingle in the roof let in a big yellow shaft of morning sunlight, full of dust motes. Just as I stepped across

the beam of sunlight I heard hay rustle at the edge of the loft, fifteen feet away.

Something black poked up over the edge of the floor from the manger below.

I never knew there'd be so much smoke in smokeless powder. The thunderclap of the first shot jetted a hatful of blue smoke into the shaft of sunlight.

That first slug breezed past so close it burned my cheek. I let my knees go and fell sideways as the second shot crashed more smoke. It missed.

I burrowed frantically into the hay to hide from the third one. As if hay would stop a slug.

The third shot never came. Every muscle in my body was braced for it, but it never came.

I sat up. Horses screamed in fright down there and kicked the sides out of their stalls.

That .38 would be back on Johnny's desk in about forty seconds. It would take that long for anybody to run out the side door and down the length of the stable on the blind side, next to the trees.

There was a shorter way to Johnny's office, but it meant running the gantlet of fear-crazed hoofs lashing out between two rows of stalls.

I remember scrambling down the ladder to the stall floor. The rest of it's a blur of those steel-shod hoofs kicking at me, and halter chains rattling.

Ol' Brer Mark got there first. My clothes stuck to me with icy sweat. I stank of fear. I shook so hard I had to shut my eyes and lean against the door of Johnny's office. But I got there first.

When I opened my eyes, Johnny Cook and Emily Hayden and Turrentine stood in front of me. "What the hell goes on here?" Turrentine growled savagely.

"Nothing. Only somebody took a couple of cracks at me with a .38."

They stared. "See if your gun's still on the desk, Johnny," I suggested.

We went into the sunny, whitewashed tack room where Johnny Cook's old roll-top desk stood in one corner. He pawed around in a litter of feed bills.

"It's gone," he told us, puzzled.

"Johnny," I said, "your wife's dead."

It was a guess. It was also brutal. The red blood drained out of Johnny Cook's rawboned, weathered face.

"Look," Turrentine snapped. "What's the matter with you people? A minute

ago you claimed Vanessa'd been murdered. Now this man's wife is dead!"

"Vanessa was Johnny's wife. She always did like men who could handle horses."

I heard Emily Hayden gasp.

THE dazed look in Johnny's washed-out blue eyes and the way his lips were too numb to handle saliva told the story.

"How long have you been married to Vanessa?" Turrentine queried curtly.

"Phoenix," Johnny Cook mumbled. "Five years ago."

"I get it," Turrentine scowled. "If she'd lived to produce one more flop, his cut of her estate wouldn't have amounted to a plugged nickel."

"Not so fast," I said. "What about me? I'm in Vanessa's will, too. So's Emily. You had a damned good motive yourself, far's that goes."

"She was costing me plenty," Turrentine admitted, his hard black eyes on my face.

I held the aces now. "Don't forget," I prodded, "that the homicide boys are a cinch to find your horse's tracks just outside the garden wall."

"All right. I went there. We fought it out and she told me to go to hell. I left while she was still telling me what she thought of me."

"Will the cops believe it? Will the newspaper boys believe it?"

Two vertical lines showed between Turrentine's eyebrows. "Anything looks bad after a killing," he grunted.

"I'm afraid you're right," I admitted. "If Emily kisses the Good Book on the witness stand, she'll reluctantly have to say my hands were cold and wet when I came into the house from the garden swimming pool this morning. Wouldn't you, Emily?"

Emily Hayden sniffed disdainfully.

I turned to Johnny. "Vanessa stayed here with you last night. Didn't she?"

Johnny's washed-out blue eyes stared around the sunny walls of the tackroom in a daze. "Yeah," he whispered.

"How was she dressed when she came over? Slacks?"

He nodded dumbly. "Handkerchief tied over her head?" I asked.

"I—don't remember."

"Did she have on jodhpur boots?"

Johnny's eyes focussed slowly on my face. "No. Gold slip—"

Emily Hayden's purse belched fire and smoke and bits of leather at me, as Turrentine knocked it out of her hands. The .38 inside it popped like smashing a blown-up paper bag, only louder.

THE leather purse lay on the floor, smoking. Turrentine fished Johnny's .38 automatic out of it, and threw it on the desk.

I looked at Johnny Cook's taut face. "Better take the clip out," I told Turrentine.

He did. "So it was dear, calm little Emily," he grinned. "She wanted to grab her hunk of Vanessa's estate while there was still something left to grab."

I nodded. "She killed Vanessa and planned to let us three pass the rap around to each other like a hot brick. The newspapers would've had a field day. She saw her chance when you rode away from the swimming pool. She simply slipped down right after you left and cracked Vanessa at the base of the skull and left her to drown."

"What did you slug her with, Emily?"

The mask of composure on Emily Hayden's face slipped for just a second.

"You nearly made it stick," I told her. "But you stubbed your toe in one important spot. You claimed you didn't see Turrentine. Then, in the stable, you told him how he'd left his cigarette on the wall. I hadn't told you about that."

"You slipped, too," she countered sweetly. "You shuffled your feet and coughed too soon. You arranged that meeting to trap me, not Mr. Turrentine. That's why I borrowed Mr. Cook's automatic. I'm sorry I missed."

"Nuts," I muttered, numbly. I was thinking about the first day Vanessa had come to my office with cardboard stuffed in her shoe to cover a hole.

Emily Hayden was powdering her nose, getting ready for the newspaper boys. "Mark," she said.

"What?"

"How did you know I'd planted those clothes on the floor and dug out her old jodhpurs to make sure even the police would find out she'd been to the stables last night?"

"The earrings," I said. "Ol' Brer Mark gave her that pair of silver frog earrings last week for a gag. She had a phobia against frogs. She wouldn't be caught dead wearing frogs on her ears."

The Killer and the Cavity

By Berna Morris

Though the jaws of the law were yawning for Culpy Benton, a tinier cavity threatened to swallow him first.



THE hubbub was two floors down, so Culpy Benton stopped on a stair landing and drew great gasping breaths. He cursed softly. Damn that little Peewee Darby, giving him a wrong steer. Not saying anything about that loan company having an alarm system. He had almost stopped it though, but the clerk had reached the buzzer before Culpy's knife had found his heart.

Culpy's lips twisted; damn the little squeak anyhow. Well, he'd lived long enough to find out you couldn't buck Culpy Benton and get away with it.

He went on up the stairs, walking swiftly, but not running. It was close to seven o'clock. Most of the offices were empty, the corridors echoing hollowly.

On the tenth floor, he left the stairs and walked rapidly down a cross hall. Luckily he had cased the joint himself. Luckily he had mapped this getaway. Cautious Culpy. That was him.

His steps rang on the marble floor and most of the offices he passed were dark and empty, but soft light glowed behind several frosted glass panels. Culpy's feet traversed a slight hump in the floor, and he knew he was in the adjoining building. Not many people knew of the opening between the two buildings. It was on the tenth floor only and had been made for the convenience of some high renting tenant.

Culpy's step was jaunty now. He turned down another hall and started down the stairs. Not the elevator. Oh, no. Not for cautious Culpy. He had gone down about half a floor when he heard a thudding of feet from far below.

Culpy stopped. There was something dreadfully familiar about the sound. His heart seemed to hiccup, then leaped for-

ward. He slid over to the grating that protected the elevator shaft. It was an old-fashioned building and the stairs were built around the elevator shaft, which was protected by heavy scrolled grating, so that you could see far down into the great black heart of the building.

Culpy eased over and peered down into the murky depths. Lights glowed on the landings. There, three floors below, he saw two figures. The figures moved, pounding upward, and he caught the gleam of buttons on the coat fronts.

Culpy's little eyes narrowed, and he mumbled vilely in his throat. Those so-and-so smart cops. He looked down again, then turned and sped back up the stairs, back down the corridor.

Right and left, left and right, Culpy's squinty little eyes darted. He tried a couple of the darkened office doors. They were all locked. The footsteps were closer now; soon they would round the corner. Light glowed from behind the frosted door-panel of the next office.

Culpy glanced over his shoulder. His lips curled away from his teeth. Voices echoed around the angle of the hall. Culpy pushed the door open and slipped inside.

Leaning against the wall, he looked about. There were a number of chairs and a table covered with magazines. A door in the far wall was ajar. A man's voice, humming softly, merged with clicking, scraping noises from the other room.

As Culpy leaned against the wall and tried to slow his plunging heart, the half-singing voice stopped, and there was the sound of a chair being moved. A figure appeared in the doorway. The man pushed the door fully open with his foot and stood staring at Culpy through thick glasses. He had on a white smock that buttoned up the side and around his neck in Russian style, and he was stirring a smooth, creamy mixture in a bowl. He

looked at Culpy and smiled vaguely.

"Thought I heard somebody. Sorry, I'm not taking any more patients to-night." He moved as though to close the door.

Culpy had been listening with only half an ear, all his senses tuned to the noises of the outside corridor. The footsteps had pounded past. Now they returned, hesitated, and seemed to be holding a conference somewhere close by. Culpy gnawed at his lip. He had to stay here for a few minutes at least.

His eyes darted about, seeking, and slid swiftly over the frosted door-panel, passed on and jerked back. His mind spelled out the reversed letters. H. D. B-R-E-C-K-E-R, D-D-S. A sawbones.

"Say, Doc—" Culpy eased across the room, his voice low, his hands in pockets, one hand caressing the thick wad of banknotes that had come from the loan company's safe, the other curled around the cool, slim length of his knife. A flick of his finger and an evil, six-inch blade would snap out.

"Say, Doc—" Culpy moved closer.

Dr. Brecker peered at him near-sightedly. He spoke hesitantly.

"Of course, if you are in pain, perhaps I could help you."

"That's it, Doc. That's it." Culpy's hand made a tentative motion at his stomach. "I hurt."

Dr. Brecker stepped back into the other room. "Come in here and I'll have a look."

The footsteps were still shuffling and mumbling around outside, so Culpy followed the doctor. He stepped into a small, spotlessly sterile office. Culpy's eyes widened and his mouth twisted as he saw the dentist chair in the center of the floor.

"Cripes! A toothsmith!"

He half-turned away, but the sound of voices in the corridor forced him back into the room, urged him cringing, into the chair at Dr. Brecker's motion.

The doctor put the bowl he had been stirring down on a cabinet and was washing his hands in a pungent disinfectant.

"Be right with you. Been making a final cast. This plaster is hard to get off."

A few seconds later he approached the chair, drying his hands on a towel.

"Now," he said, "open up and let's see what the trouble is."

Culpy cracked his mouth. The dentist pried the reluctant teeth apart. He adjusted his glasses and peered inside, then

clucked his tongue and wagged his head.

"Hmm. Think I see the trouble." He picked up a small instrument, the end of which gleamed and twisted wickedly. Then he dove back into Culpy's mouth. "Is this it?" He touched a tooth, and red-hot agony screamed through Culpy's veins. His body arched in the chair.

The dentist stood erect and turned to his instrument cabinet. "We'd better fix that right away."

Culpy was holding one hand to his throbbing jaw, and the other was nervously on the knife in his pocket. His little eyes were wicked and fierce on the doctor's unconscious back. Nobody had ever hurt Culpy like that and lived—for long.

Turning back to the patient, the dentist smiled his automatic, sympathetic smile.

"Now, Mr. — eh — what did you say your name was?"

Culpy scowled. "Smith," he ground out.

"Now Mr. Smith, this might hurt a little." He pried Culpy's teeth apart again, and inserted a vise of some sort. "So you'll be sure and keep that month open."

It had been years since Culpy had been in a dentist's chair, but he remembered the drill. He shrank back as the dentist approached with it. He couldn't close his mouth. The vise prevented that. The sides of his jaws were aching with the strain.

Then the drilling started. Sweat popped out on Culpy's forehead and lip. His hand was tight around his knife. Clenched so tightly that the nails were breaking on the bone knife-handle. The whining, screeching rasp of the drill seemed to be going through the top of his head.

The drilling stopped. Dr. Brecker looked down at Culpy and frowned.

"Mr. Smith, you'll have to keep that tongue out of the way." The dentist peered at him disapprovingly, then poised the drill once more. Just then there was a knock on the outside door.

Cringing back in his chair, Culpy heard the door open, and the clomp of heavy feet crossing the room. The chair faced away from the door, but Culpy saw the dentist as he looked up.

"Yes?"

There was an apologetic cough and a shuffling of feet.

"Seen anything of a little fellow in a blue suit, sort of squinty eyes?" The voice was heavy. Culpy could almost feel

the glow from the brass buttons. He pulled his muscles tight and waited. The voice went on.

"He knocked over a safe down on the seventh floor and knifed the clerk. The fellow gave us a pretty good description before he died. Sounds like one of the regulars—called Culp. Cautious Culp." The voice hesitated. "Seen anybody around?"

Inside, Culp cackled. The dumb clucks; never thought of looking for Culp in a dentist chair. Then he tightened up again. Dr. Brecker was holding the drill poised over his face. He was looking over Culp's head in his near-sighted way. He shook his head.

"Not a soul, officer."

"Okay." The steps were retreating. "But keep an eye out. He's dangerous." The outside door closed.

Dr. Brecker sighed and the drill started whirring again. He held it ready for the dive, then he drew it slowly back and the vibrant sound of the instrument died. The dentist looked down at Culp, his eyes traveling over the length of his blue suit and back to his face. The room seemed completely silent, not even the sound of their breathing disturbed the quiet.

Without looking, Dr. Brecker raised his hand and hung the drill back on its hook. His eyes darted to the door and he moved swiftly. But Culp was faster. There was a flicker from his pocket and the knife slashed. The dentist staggered back against a cabinet, one hand to the side of the white smock, a slow, welling redness creeping through his fingers. He looked down at his reddening fingers, then up at Culp. His voice was hardly audible:

"Why, you—you ingrate! You contemptible little murderer!"

Suddenly anger seemed to conquer the dentist's pain. He picked up the nearest object, the bowl of hardening plaster, and lunged at Culp, still half-crouched in the chair, his mouth gaping grotesquely from the vise.

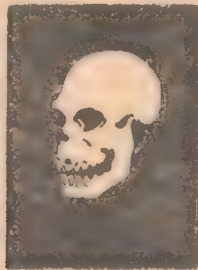
Culp dodged, and the knife slashed out again. Then the bowl of plaster crushed down over his face, and he was blind and choking. He surged upward and heard a thud as he flung the dentist aside. He clawed at the bowl over his face, forgetting even his knife as he fought for breath.

The bowl crashed onto the floor, and he scraped at the stuff on his face. The plaster was like heavy, thick mush and was hardening swiftly. Hardening horribly fast. Culp couldn't breathe. He pawed at his eyes. Through the heavy lumps that clung to his eyelids, he saw the dentist sitting against the wall, holding his side. And laughing. Laughing!

Stretching out a hand, Culp took a staggering step toward him. He could help. He could help—

The heavy thick plaster had poured down Culp's vise-open mouth and had formed a column of rock in his throat. He tugged at the vise with his weakening, ineffectual fingers. He tore it from his bleeding mouth. But still there was no air. He looked at the dentist again, and there was a red floating mist between him and the man against the wall. The mist was thickening.

Culp felt his knees buckling. The air he couldn't breathe was thick and dark before his eyes. From far away he heard sounds. Curious sounds. The dentist's face was almost lost in dimness now. Culp saw the lips moving, grinning. The voice he heard not at all.



The Choke's On Me

Ace Mystery Novelet

By Mark Coe



CHAPTER I

IT WAS raining pedigreed puppies when my lights swung off Miami Avenue past the two coral posts and onto the gravel drive that led to the Herick mansion. Beside the house I switched off the head-beams, grabbed up my bag, fumbled for the keys on the steering column, and jumped out smack into a puddle of mud that squished over the top of my clean white oxfords.

Cursing softly, I slammed the door and followed the curve of the drive ahead to

where the entrance light was still burning. There, dropping the bag, I pressed the buzzer and waited, shaking water from my coat.

A female in a very plain dark brown dress opened the door. "Mister Bowen?" she asked, even before I could open my mouth.

"Yes." I picked up my bag.

"Come in." She swung the door wider. "My uncle told me to expect you."

The hat I had started to pass came down quickly to my side. So this was the old man's niece, I thought, a little dis-

The first night Private Detective Bowen arrived to guard his wealthy client, that old colonel strangled to death. And though Bowen didn't see anything funny about it, the suspicious heirs made it clear that they thought the choke was on him.



appointed. I had almost taken her for the maid.

Leading me through a wide tile-decorated hallway past several darkened rooms, she stopped at the bottom of a set of broad stairs, where she turned around. I got my first really good look at her. Her hair, soft and auburn-colored, would have been almost pretty if she had allowed it to fall naturally about her shoulders, but it was tied in a severe knot at the back of her head. Her facial

lines, fine and sensitive, showed breeding, but the absence of makeup made her look pale and tired.

But her smile was pleasing, even though there was no color in the lips that lined her even white teeth.

"Would you like me to show you to your room, Mister Bowen?" she said pleasantly. "I've given you the one next to Uncle Mort."

"Do you suppose he's still up?" I parried. "I'd kinda like to see him."

She glanced down at her wrist, frowning uncertainly. "He told me he'd see you if you came before eleven-thirty. But it's ten after twelve now. I'd hate to disturb him if he's asleep. He's had a hard day—his asthma, you know."

"I know," I answered sympathetically. But I didn't. I'd barely met the old boy.

Though a bit disappointed, I said nothing more, but picked up my bag again and followed the girl's slim young figure up the stairs, wondering irrelevantly as I watched her move, catlike, just how many other bodies like that there were in this world going around disguised in dowdy brown dresses.

At the door to my room she bid me good-night, wished me a good rest and then left me. As I smiled my thanks I tried to figure out just what it was that bothered me.

The whole setup was screwy, I decided while preparing for bed. I had a new job, but I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I had a new client, but I knew nothing about him.

Sinking into the luxurious soft sheets, I lit a cigarette and thought it over. The girl's uncle, Colonel Morton Herrick, had stepped into my office just that very morning. He was very vague about what he wanted. Gradually I gathered the idea that the old guy wanted principally someone to stay day and night at his place, to keep an eye on his guests, and, last and most important, to stick close to him. At the end of our interview I tried to pin him down a little.

"Colonel Herrick," I said, hesitating just a second, "it sounds to me like you're asking for personal protection."

The old buzzard gave me a frozen stare that rained snow. "Brilliant, Mr. Bowen. Since all the guests present will be close relatives, I don't think the task will be too arduous, even for you. But please remember your job is to observe, not to speculate. I leave the last to my lawyers. And now, good day. I shall expect you late this evening."

I knew then why the old gent had made such a generous offer. He had to be generous, to get away with such insults.

AFTER a while I crushed out my cigarette, switched off the bed lamp, shoved my fist into the pillow, and closed my eyes. Outside the rain and the palm

fronds scraping the wall of the house made a restless whispering in the night. If it hadn't been for the half-dozen unanswered questions racing through my mind, they might have lulled me to sleep.

After what seemed like ages, my body began to relax and my thoughts began to wander. I began seeing a neat little figure in a dowdy brown dress, climbing a set of wide carpeted stairs. Then something jerked me awake.

It was another sound, harsh yet somehow muffled. Raising from the pillow, I strained in the darkness to listen. It came again—one, two, three sharp, explosive sounds. Suddenly I realized what it was. In the next room the Colonel was coughing. Feeling like a fool, I lay back again and told myself to relax.

The sounds did not come again. Lying there quietly listening, gradually the fact that they did not recur began to bother me even more. My tensed nerves seemed to keep waiting for them. It was useless even to close my eyes.

I remembered suddenly something the girl had said about the old man's health. Without thinking I jumped out of bed, snapped on the lamp, and pulled on my robe. Fumbling vainly for my slippers, I crossed the icy cold tile to the door.

The hallway outside was much darker than before. A single light burned feebly over the top of the stairway at the far end of the corridor. From my door at the other end I saw at a glance that the half-dozen other doors lining the hall were firmly closed. Easing forward some twenty feet to the one next to mine, I stood outside it for a moment and listened.

Nary a whisper came from inside. I leaned low, held one ear against the panelling, and strained my eardrums. It was as quiet as a Boston Sunday. Bending lower, I glanced at the keyhole, then at the floor sill, looking for a crack of light. There was none. Satisfied, I breathed a sigh of relief, turned around, and walked straight into a gleaming white shirt front.

"Pardon me," I muttered, startled, stepping back.

He was the biggest, most impressive-looking man I have ever seen. He stood at least six inches over my puny six feet. His black beetle-like brows frowned down at me with an expression that carried the chill in my feet to the top of my spine. I knew he was a Herrick, I could tell that at a glance. He had the bushy brows, the

long Roman nose, the square forceful jaw, and the steely blue eyes of the old man. If it hadn't been for the coal black hair and perhaps a few extra pounds, I would have mistaken him for the Colonel himself.

"I—I thought I heard a disturbance," I stammered. "I thought perhaps the Colonel might be ill. I thought I heard coughing."

The big guy didn't seem to hear what I was saying, but kept staring straight at me. "You're the new secretary, aren't you?" he said tonelessly.

"Yes," I nodded, my hands gesturing weakly towards the door. "I thought I heard coughing," I tried to explain.

Mr. Big kept staring, then suddenly broke into a smile. "Oh, that." He made a gesture and tapped me companionably on the arm. "He does that all night. That's his asthma. Don't let that bother you."

Grinning like the fool I was, I turned away from him and headed back for my room.

"Good night," he called, going toward one of the doors down the hall.

I grunted something in reply, then re-entered my room, snapped off the light, slammed the pillows with both fists, and sank into bed, thoroughly disgusted and thoroughly relaxed. From the hallway downstairs somewhere a deep-throated clock struck one.

LATER, the nurse said she screamed three times. I never heard the first two, but with the third I sat bolt-upright in bed, the skin crawling up my spine, my hands clutching frantically for my gun. It was a helluva way to awaken.

I was the fifth person to get to the Colonel's room. Mr. Big, the young niece, a fat important-looking little guy I didn't recognize, and the nurse, a big aggressive-looking job wrapped in an unromantic terry cloth robe, were there ahead of me. Over by the far wall next to the bed, they gazed down at something sprawled on the floor. The bed was empty.

"Phone Doctor Whitehead, George."

Mr. Big, my friends in the hallway, spoke first. "His number's on the outside of the directory. Hurry!"

The little fat fellow edged his way around me, allowing a view past the bed. It wasn't a very pretty sight. Evidently the old man had tried to get up to close

the windows just beyond the foot of the left side of his bed and had fallen. There was only the cold tile on the floor to break his fall. A nasty bump was on the left side of his forehead. His face, as the nurse held his head gently in her lap, seemed almost purple. It looked like a stroke.

"I'm afraid it's too late." The nurse looked up, taking her hand off the old man's pulse. "He's dead."

A deep sob from the other side of the room was the only response. Looking across, I saw the niece hide her face suddenly in the sleeve of her robe while her shoulders twitched violently. Crossing over, I took her arm and led her out of the room.

Ten minutes or so later, soon after I heard the front doorbell ring, I left the girl in her room and went back to the Colonel's suite. The doctor, a spare, ruddy faced fellow whose hairless pate belied his name, was bent over his ex-patient examining his eyes.

"You say you found him here on the floor, Miss Post?"

The badly frightened nurse nodded her tousled head. "He was dead when I got to him," she murmured.

The medico made a disgusted frown, shoved back the eyelids once more. He rose to his feet. "He certainly was, Miss Post," he said, a little grimly. "He's been dead for over an hour!"

The eyes of the whole room, filled now with another couple I did not recognize, rested reprovingly on the nurse. That aggressive-looking female blushed for a second, stuck out her angular jaw, and motioned helplessly to a door at the far end of the bedroom that obviously connected with hers.

"But he insisted I keep the door closed, Doctor," she protested, her eyes bright with indignation. "I could hear nothing, what with the rain and all this evening."

The physician barely looked at her, then grabbed up his kit. "Most unfortunate," he snapped sharply, "for I am afraid now I shall have to call in the coroner."

Every eye in the room stared at him. For a second you could have heard a feather drop. Georgie, the Fat Boy, was the only one finally with the guts to speak.

"Really, Doctor, do you, ah, think that is quite necessary?" he inquired, draw-

ing himself up to his full five feet.

The spare old medico gave him a stare that would have chilled the fires of Hades. "I am not accustomed," he said, "to declaring my patients dead of natural causes unless they are in bed. Particularly when they die with assorted bumps on their heads." He waved an imperative hand at the corpse on the floor. "Leave him until the coroner arrives." He strode majestically out of the room, followed by Mr. Big.

Hurrying to my room, I pulled on my shoes and pants, shoved my revolver into a back pocket, and rushed out into the hall. Downstairs in the lobby I could hear Mr. Big and the doctor talking. Locating the back stairway, I made my way silently down. In the dark corridor below I found my bearings to the kitchen and glided through to the back door. As I unlocked the latch, the big clock in the front hall boomed out three.

OUTSIDE the rain had stopped, but the night had turned cold. Finding the gravel path that circled the back of the house, I edged my way forward in the shadows. In the dim light from the front entrance I could see a shiny sedan parked up beyond my fliwer on the narrow drive. Suddenly the tall figure of the doctor came into view. I eased forward, keeping the cars between me and the house.

Instead of crossing to the driver's side, the physician opened the right-hand door and started in. Grabbing the door handle on the opposite side, I met him halfway in the middle of the seat. No one from the house had seen it, I was sure.

He didn't seem a bit surprised to see me. "Well?" he said, eying me up and down.

"I'm Bill Bowen," I began. "Colonel Herrick hired me yesterday as his private secretary." I paused. "Only I'm not a secretary—I'm a private detective."

That one startled him. "So?" he said.

"I want to know about this death," I went on. "What caused it? Was it a stroke?"

"No." He wagged his head. "I'm not quite sure. But the complexion and all seemed to indicate strangulation."

That one stopped me. I stared at him for a moment. "You mean—someone might have choked him to death?"

He laughed quietly, and pulled out a cigar. "Not necessarily." He bit the end

of the stogie, spit it out. "The Colonel has suffered from asthma for a number of years, you know. He may have had a sudden attack. It's not impossible."

I felt my stack of suspicions begin to crumble. "Oh," I said, disappointed. "Then you don't think—"

"I don't think anything. That's the coroner's job. All I know is that my patient died outside his bed with a nasty bump on his head. That's enough."

I thought I had the answer to that one. "But," I said, "couldn't he have been having a bad asthma attack and been going to the bathroom for some medicine or something?"

His answer was a sharp snort. "And you're a detective," he said. "No man gets out on the cold tile on the left side of his bed when the bathroom is on the right."

"But what about the windows on that side? Maybe he was going to change the air."

Again there was a snort. "Asthma patients sleep with their windows closed down here this time of year. Too much pollen."

I was getting nowhere fast. I tried another tack. "By the way, all these relatives—do you know them?"

He shook his head, blowing smoke at the windshield. "Only two, Henry Crowell and Margaret Vail, his nephew and niece, children of the Colonel's two sisters. He has no direct heirs."

"He the big fellow?"

He nodded. "In the insurance business, here in Miami. Not a bad fellow. But the niece, Margaret, was the Colonel's favorite. She kept house for him. Not very attractive, but nice—devoted to him. Confidentially, the Colonel has left the bulk of his estate to her. I witnessed the will just last month. By the way, how is she? I didn't see her tonight. Pretty shaken up?"

"Yes," I answered. "I took her to her room. I got her to take some brandy."

"Nice girl." He blew another cloud of smoke and waited a moment. "The other relatives—George Browning and his wife, and Lawrence Woods—I've never met. Live in Colorado some place. This is their first trip here. Just got in this evening, I think. I've heard the Colonel speak of them."

His hand reached for the ignition. It was a hint. I thought quickly, then came

out with one more poser.

"Are there any servants?"

Again there was the derisive snort. "They had a Chinese houseboy up until two weeks ago, when he got fired."

"Why?"

An amused grin crossed the tough old medic's face. "Miss Post claimed he was making improper advances. The Colonel had to dismiss him."

I thought of the unattractive, belligerent-looking nurse and stifled a laugh. "I hardly admire his taste."

The motor of the sedan caught with a roar. "Nor I," he growled. "The bungling idiot!"

I took it that he meant Miss Post.

I slid out of the seat. With another roar the old doctor sent the shiny sedan in reverse the length of the driveway.

When the headlights flashed away from me, I pivoted, my eyes accidentally sweeping the row of upstairs windows. What I saw made something inside my tummy do a funny little flip-flop. As my eyes glanced past, the drape that lined the glass of the dimly lighted corner room trembled slightly and suddenly fell straight.

"What the devil?" I thought. I walked back to the kitchen doing some worried thinking.

CHAPTER II

UPSTAIRS in the Colonel's room, George Browning, the cocky little fat guy, his wife, a stout artificial blonde, and the other cousin, Lawrence Woods, a chinless character resembling more than faintly the Casper Milquetoast cartoon in the funnies, were waiting around for something to happen. I strolled in, borrowed a cigarette from Woods, and took a seat on the window ledge above the little gas radiator near the Colonel's corpse. The nurse, who was evidently busy dressing in the next room, had laid a clean white sheet over the old gent's lengthy frame. It looked a bit weird.

I hadn't been sitting long before I realized that my south end was suddenly becoming strangely cold, and damp. Standing up, I saw that the seat of my pants were sopping wet. Then I looked at the window ledge. Where I had been sitting it was as damp as the ocean. But the windows were closed!

I remembered what the doctor had said. *Asthma patients sleep with their win-*

dows closed down here. But sometime during the night the windows had been open! Why?

My curiosity aroused, I leaned down closer, my hand touching the gas radiator. Again I got a little shock. The radiator was warm, although it was turned off!

Puzzled, I looked at it more closely. It was the gas type with the water jacket like that of an ordinary radiator above and with a gas burner below. In a climate where central heating is not necessary, it is the type used by the big houses and hotels in Florida. You simply turn on the gas and light the fire when needed.

But the fire now was out, had been out for at least a couple of hours. Straightening, I scratched my head. It didn't add up. The windows open and the heater turned on. I couldn't figure it out.

Turning I saw Fat Boy giving me the eye.

"Something wrong, son?" he inquired haughtily.

I smiled my handsomest. "Nope. Just wondered how the darned thing worked," I lied. "Never saw one before."

He gave me a cold scornful stare, then turned his attentions back to his wife.

Feeling properly put in my place, I crossed to the far wall, where there was a large desk, and found a dry seat. On top of the desk a pile of papers were scattered about in great disorder. A letter on top of the pile addressed in the Colonel's shaky handwriting caught my eye. There were two short syllables, then, in clearer script, a Miami address. Beside it was a check, inscribed in a line at the bottom, *For services rendered*. On top of that was a little card which looked strangely similar to a social security tag.

The last name, examined closely, seemed to be Lew or Lee. Suddenly something clicked in my brain. The Chinese houseboy!

The next act was pure reflex. Barely looking around, I scooped the letter and two slips up and crammed them noiselessly into my pocket. Then I looked up.

From across the room, Fat Boy was staring straight at me. Slowly, his jaw dropped. He started to speak.

Again I flashed my prettiest smile. "Little chilly, isn't it?"

It threw him completely off guard. His jam clamped shut. I finished my ciga-

rette, waited another minute, and walked out of the room with a silent sigh of relief.

BACK in the room while I pulled on the rest of my clothes I had time to do some serious thinking. The situation wasn't too cozy. Something about the Herrick household was definitely phony. So far the most suspicious character about the place seemed to be me. Fat Boy had seen me swipe the letter, and someone had been watching me from that upstairs window. Henry Crowell had run into me outside the old man's room just about the time he had died, and I knew what he must be thinking.

If I was to stick around a while, it looked as though I might be needing a friend. Who among the Colonel's relatives actually knew what I was doing here? Did the old man's favorite, Margaret Vail, know anything about me?

Speak of the devil—a knock came at my door. When I opened it, there she was.

Her face was pale, as usual, but she looked a little better than when I had seen her last. As she walked into the room, she didn't smile. She simply examined me, her face expressionless, and held something out to me in her hand.

"Mr. Bowen," she said coolly. "Since my uncle will no longer need your services, you are dismissed. You will leave in the morning after breakfast."

I looked at the thing in her hand. It was a twenty dollar bill.

"What's this?" I said.

"Your payment."

I laughed. "But the Colonel had already paid me—two weeks in advance."

She scarcely blinked. "Then this is for your expenses. You will be ready to leave in the morning, please." And that was that. She was gone.

Sitting back on the bed I fumbled nervously for another cigarette. There was no doubt about Margaret Vail any longer, I mused. She knew who I was, and she didn't like me a bit. Curiously, I wondered why.

Suddenly another thought struck me. I remembered the moving curtain in the upstairs window. The corner second-floor bedroom belonged to Margaret Vail! Standing, I patted the pocket that held my gun. "We're getting warm, Roscoe!" I murmured softly.

Nobody in Florida builds a basement in his house. There are two good reasons for that: first, few houses on the coast are high enough above sea level to allow one, and second, there's nothing to put in one. Furnaces are unheard of, except in the extreme northern part of the state. If any utilities such as hot water heaters or gas tanks are needed they are usually kept in the garage.

It was just getting light as I sneaked again out through the kitchen door and followed the gravel drive back toward the Herrick garage. Both the big sliding doors were closed, but one of them was unlocked and revealed the rear end of a station wagon as I strolled in.

To the right was a big dark sedan. I walked around it, examining nothing in particular, then stopped by the station wagon. A strange odor suddenly piqued my attention. At first I thought it was gasoline. But then I sniffed again.

Carbon tetrachloride! It was the smell of the cleaning fluid I used on my suits sometimes. There was no mistaking it.

Grabbing the station-wagon door, I jerked it open and peered inside. The odor became even stronger. Pushing my head in farther, I tried to peer through the dim light.

Suddenly, half instinctively, I straightened up. Behind me there was a sound, like the scraping of a shoe on cement.

As I pivoted I got only the flash of an arm and the faint silhouette of a stocky figure right behind me. Then the sudden, blinding pain—the bump—and blackness.

I AWOKELying on the cold cement floor.

As I opened my eyes, ahead of me I could see one half of the garage door swung open, letting in a flood of bright morning light. I must have been out a long time.

Struggling to my feet, I looked around. Nothing was gone. The car door was still open, the sedan was still parked opposite. Quickly, I dived my hands into my pockets.

My gun was gone. But worse than that, the papers I had stuck in my pockets from the Colonel's desk were missing also. I swore softly. I hadn't even remembered to look them over up in my room.

Disgusted, I turned back to the station wagon. The heavy odor of clearing fluid

now almost nauseated me, but I climbed in and clambered through to the back seat. It was there the smell was strongest.

Now in the bright light I got a good look at the leather seats. There was not a thing to be seen. I sat down on the back seat to steady myself.

Something beneath me made a sudden clinking sound. Looking down, I grabbed up a nickel that had fallen from my pocket. Tentatively, I stuck my other hand down between the cushions. Something struck my fingers. I pulled it out.

It was just a hairpin—a big thick celluloid thing like the kind I had seen my grandmother wear. Irrelevantly, I wondered who in the Herrick household would be wearing that kind of old-fashioned stuff. Carelessly, I stuck it into my pocket.

Giving up the hunt, I pushed the driver's seat forward and started to climb out. Then something else caught my eye. Attached to the steering column below the dash was a little white card, a chauffeur's license I realized when I leaned down closer to examine it.

Charles Hugh Lee, I read, and a Miami address. For a second it failed to interest me, then something clicked. Lew—Lee—that must be the Chinese houseboy's card, I suddenly realized! Before I climbed out onto the garage floor, I peered at the address and memorized every syllable.

I was feeling a little better about things now. On that side of the station wagon stood the utility room, an alcove with the hot water heater, a couple of wash tubs, and a bottled gas tank, the kind that all Miami houses use. I looked them over carefully, particularly the gas tank, and wandered back to the house.

I had seen what I wanted to know.

MMARGARET VAIL was alone in the kitchen preparing breakfast. When I walked in, she turned her pale expressionless face to me and gave me a slightly inquisitive frown.

"You look done in," she said coolly.

"I am." I breathed a sigh and leaned against the table, watching her fix the coffee. "Is there a drink in the house?"

"Isn't it a little early for that?" She seemed to feel uncomfortable with me watching her.

"I've had a hard day." I smiled at her, wryly. "My nerves aren't used to this."

She set the percolator on the stove,

glanced back at me a second, then walked toward a door. "Come with me," she ordered.

Entering the butler's pantry, which was lined with cupboards on both sides, she opened the little doors directly over the sink, looked all around, closed them, then went to another cupboard farther down. She closed it and went to another. I saw her face wrinkle into an angry frown.

"Can I help?" I said.

"No." She seemed annoyed with my offer. "It seems to be misplaced."

But the last cupboard she opened, the one beneath the sink, revealed a whole row of bottles—enough liquor to make a saloon keeper's mouth water. Misplaced, I thought. Some misplacing!

She picked out a bottle of Scotch, poured out a glass quarter full, and handed it to me.

"Won't you join me?" I said. "You look like you need it."

She glanced at the bottle hesitatingly, pulled down another glass, and poured out three thick fingers. Then she raised it up and drained half without a blink.

Watching it, the act didn't seem to go with the costume, with the dowdy brown house dress, and the rolled-up hair.

We were looking at each other as we took the second swallow.

"Do you know this George Browning very well?" I said then. "What kind of a guy is he?" I was thinking of the stocky shadow behind me in the garage.

Her eyelashes didn't even flicker. "He's my cousin," she answered simply, "but I never met him in my life before last night. The same goes for Mr. Woods." She put her glass down on the sideboard. I could tell she didn't want to talk to me. There was a brief pause. "Why?"

"Nothing." I took my last gulp. "Just seemed like a peculiar duck, that's all."

"All we Herricks are slightly odd, you'll find," was her answer, as she turned and snapped out the light. "It's a pity you can't get to know us better."

I had a funny feeling she was laughing at me when we walked out of the pantry.

CHAPTER III

IN my bathroom I tried at least five minutes to get some hot water out of the faucet to take some of the stubble off my face, but with no luck. Everything

seemed to be going wrong in the Herrick household this morning, even the hot water. I strolled back into the bedroom, got out my sports jacket, and started to change.

It was only when I went to change my keys from one pocket to another that I fished out the forgotten celluloid hairpin. There in the full light of the room something about it suddenly caught my eye. The tips pointing toward the scalp were covered with something that seemed to be slightly red. It looked perhaps like dried red ink. It could have been hair dye. But standing there in the center of the room in the brightness of the sunlit morning, I was pretty darned sure it was plain, ordinary human blood!

A bellow from the hall interrupted my pondering. A voice, deep, resonant, but slightly raucous—a voice powerful yet pleasant—issued from the downstairs hallway.

Everybody in Miami who has ever been to a nightclub, a prizefight, a jai-lai match, or a horse race knows that voice as well as his own. Once heard, it is never forgotten. Mark Murray, Miami homicide chief and general man-about-town, was its proud owner. I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard it. I had hoped the coroner would be sending him along.

The big redhead spotted me the minute I poked my nose outside the room. His lean tanned face wrinkled into a smile, and his lips formed a familiar greeting before he caught my signal. Then his jaw just clamped shut and he walked on past me, straight as a rod, into the Colonel's room. Margaret Vail, following behind him, missed the whole thing.

The entire household was assembled in the late millionaire's bedroom, evidently at Mark's request, when I stepped in. Only one face was unfamiliar to me, a tall, rather aristocratic looking gent wearing a pair of fancy nose-pincher glasses and carrying a brief case. Mark set everything straight at the beginning by introducing him as the Colonel's lawyer.

Most of the investigation was pure routine. First, Mark announced that the coroner had found that the Colonel had died of suffocation, that the death had occurred probably sometime between one and two in the morning. To set his listeners at ease, he explained that the strangulation evidently had been the re-

sult of the Colonel's asthma, that the investigation was merely for the purpose of clearing all concerned. You could feel the whole room relax.

Then he began to work. Turning first to Lawrence Woods and to Fat Boy and his wife, he verified the time of their arrival the previous evening at about ten-thirty. Margaret Vail, in turn, checked on that, and added that she had retired at twelve-fifteen, soon after she had let me in. It was my turn next.

Sadistic pleasure gleamed in Mark's eyes as he faced me.

"And are you also a relative of Colonel Herrick's?" he began caustically.

"No," I replied uncomfortably. "I'm his secretary."

Mark's massive eyebrows lifted. "And how long have you been in his employment?"

"Since midnight last night." I didn't bat an eyelash.

Mark's face registered mock surprise. "Funny working hours for a secretary," he mumbled. "What time did you get to bed?"

"About twelve-fifteen. Miss Vail showed me my room." I looked at the female in the dowdy brown dress, and she nodded her head.

"And you remained in your room all night up to the time Miss Post screamed for assistance?"

It hadn't taken him long to find the sore spot. Trust old Mark to put the finger on it. I hesitated.

But the Colonel's nephew, Henry Crowell, didn't give me a chance. "No, he didn't," Mr. Big spoke up. "I saw him outside my uncle's room at about one o'clock. He was leaning against the door."

I felt every eye snap in my direction. Glancing across at Mr. Big, I met his cold, accusing stare uneasily. His palsy-walsy manner of a few hours ago was completely gone. Subconsciously, I wondered if Margaret Vail or Fat Boy had been telling little tales.

"I thought I heard a disturbance," I explained weakly. "It was the Colonel's coughing."

Mark heard me with disbelief written all over his face, wagged his head sorrowfully, then turned to Crowell.

"What were you doing in the hall at one in the morning?"

Mr. Big's answer was smooth and casual, "I had been to a party. Ask Mr. Har-

ris here. I left his place about twelve-thirty and drove home in the station wagon. It was exactly five minutes to one when I put the car in the garage."

MARK didn't even bother to look at the lawyer for confirmation, but turned his attention at last to the nurse, Miss Post.

"Were you the last person to talk to Colonel Herrick before he died?" he asked.

She nodded her head. "I brought him his sleeping medicine at eleven or a little past."

"Was he all right when you left him?"

She hesitated a moment, looked confusedly about the room, then murmured nervously, "He seemed to be a bit disturbed."

"About what? Could you tell?" Mark shot back.

Once more she hesitated. "Well," she stammered, "Mr. Browning and Mr. Woods had just arrived and had been in to see him. I think there was a little argument of some kind—about money or something. I heard them from my room."

I looked at George Browning. His face was chalk-white.

"About money?" Again Mark looked incredulous. "What about money?"

The nurse bit her lips as though she had already said too much and looked around the room in a sort of mute appeal. Harris, the lawyer, came to her rescue.

"I think I can make a good guess as to what the little discussion was about," he put in smoothly.

Mark pivoted, stared at him. "Shoot."

Harris wet his lips. "A few months ago," he went on calmly, "Colonel Herrick decided to invite his near relatives down here to his winter home for a little family reunion and to discuss family business affairs. You see, the Colonel had amassed a considerable fortune in his lifetime. He was anxious that some of it be shared by his relatives during his lifetime, so that the bulk of it would not be lost after his death through the heavy inheritance taxes."

He paused dramatically. Mark nodded him on.

"Under the present tax laws, an individual may donate to any person any amount up to the sum of five thousand dollars without penalty. Over five thou-

sand dollars he must pay a gift tax, but he may give to as many different people as he likes.

"The Colonel had hit upon the idea of donating to each of his five heirs—Mr. Crowell, Miss Vail, Mr. Woods, and Mr. and Mrs. Browning—each year at Christmas time five thousand dollars each, so as to avoid eventually both the gift and the inheritance taxes."

He paused again, and Mark cut in. "Go on. But I don't see how that could cause any argument."

The smooth-looking lawyer smiled easily and waved a patient hand. "Let me go further," he said. "Colonel Herrick's nearest relatives are Miss Vail and Mr. Crowell, his niece and nephew. Naturally, he thought that the largest share of his money should go to them. So he had made a further agreement with Mr. and Mrs. Browning and Mr. Woods that when he gave them their five thousand dollar gifts, they in turn were to donate half the amounts to Miss Vail and Mr. Crowell."

He smiled to let the plan sink into Mark's brain, then made the little waving gesture again. "Of course, it sounds a bit unethical," he added. "But since there was no written agreement, no one could say it was illegal. It does effectively avoid the very heavy gift tax. But, of course, it was bound to make the Brownings and Mr. Woods feel a bit discriminated against. I pointed that out to the Colonel at the time."

He turned and gave the slightly embarrassed three in the corner a look of paternal solicitude. My eyes fell on George Browning. His face now was flushed a livid red. I didn't think it was just embarrassment.

Mark was lighting a fresh cigarette when a uniformed cop suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"Emergency call on the radio, Chief," he stated. "They found a stiff down on the breakwater. Want you there right away."

Mark flipped his match on the floor, glanced slowly around, then announced to all, "The investigation is not complete, so we'll have to continue this later."

His eyes fell on me. "Mr. Bowen, you'd better come along. I'd like to ask you a few more questions."

Every eye in the room followed us as we went out. As my eyes in turn swept

the company I couldn't help but read something in their faces that seemed pretty close to both accusation and relief.

A BLUE squad car was parked behind my jalopy on the driveway as the three of us stepped out of the house. Leaving Mark for a moment, I went forward, opened the door of my car, jerked at the steering wheel, then went forward and examined the grass bordering the gravel beyond the front wheels.

As I came back to the squad car, Mark gave me a funny look. "What's up?"

"Just curious," I said. "Henry Crowell's alibi doesn't stack up."

Mark seemed mildly interested. "How come?"

I lit a cigarette. "Remember he told you he came in about one in the station wagon?"

The redhead nodded.

"My jalopy has been standing there blocking the driveway since midnight last night, yet the station wagon is back in the garage. He couldn't have driven around, because there aren't any marks on the soggy grass. And he couldn't have pushed mine out of the way, because the steering gear has been locked."

"Hmm," was Mark's only reaction. I was a little annoyed. Mark's a nice guy, but he has always been a little too confident of his own abilities as a detective to ever be a good listener.

In a few minutes our siren was screaming a path through the traffic over the county causeway toward the Beach. Briefly, I sketched the night's events for Mark's benefit, omitting nothing. I couldn't tell how carefully Mark listened, but something told me some of what I said was being lost. It was almost as though Mark had already made up his mind on the case, although it could have been that he just never thought much of me as a detective. So far I'd never been able to crack a case ahead of him.

When the sedan pulled to a stop near the breakwater at the tip end of the south beach, he came back with just one last question, which revealed where his mind had been.

"Who's this Vail dame? I've seen that figure before. The face ain't so familiar, but I never forget a shape."

Remembering Mark's famous reputation with the young damsels of the cho-

rus in the night spots around town, I smiled:

"She's the Colonel's niece. His favorite, so Doc Whitehead says. She stands to get the bulk of the Colonel's cash by his will."

Mark wagged his head sorrowfully. "If only she'd pretty up a little," he murmured wistfully. "What a waste of pulchritude!"

Out on the end of the pile of racks that line the Miami harbor channel, two plainclothes men and a couple of whitecoats from the coroner's squad were working over a figure stretched out on one of the big cement blocks. Mark bent down and examined the female briskly, while I took a good look.

She wasn't much to see. She was young, thirtyish, but very plain, dressed in a very ordinary black house dress that clung damply to her shapeless figure. It was only when Mark turned over her right hand that anybody got very interested. On the third finger was an enormous gold ring which held a diamond that must have been at least three carats.

"Whew!" one of the whitecoats whistled. "Must have bucks. What would she want to go and take a dive off the rocks for?"

"Not for love," the other commented. "This one's too homely."

Mark was examining the ugly gash on her forehead. "Where did you find her, boys—in the water?" he asked.

The first one pointed to a big rock some twelve feet below near the edge of the drink. "On that one," he said. "She must'a dove off here when the tide was high and the rock was just under water. Otherwise she'd have floated out to Davy Jones."

Mark looked down at the water and seemed to ponder a moment. Then he stood up. "Maybe," he said. "Any identification?"

One of the coppers shook his head.

Mark took one more look around, then started back across the rocks. "Have the coroner look at her and give me a report. Come on, Bill."

I followed him back to the squad car. The three of us were soon screaming back across the causeway. Mark didn't say much on the way back. Looking out across the ship channel that lined the causeway, I couldn't help wondering about things a little. The tide was run-

ning out from the harbor now. It struck me how simple it would be to dump a corpse from a car into the channel from the causeway without a soul being the wiser. A running tide could carry a floating object clear out to the breakwater. I looked at Mark and wondered if he could be pondering the same thing.

When we reached Miami again, the big redhead spoke up, "Where to, Bill? You're on your own now for awhile. I've got some work to do. I'll see you at the Herrick place at one."

I thought a minute and then said, "Let me off here."

Mark tapped the driver on the shoulder and we slowed down at a corner.

"Something not?" Mark smiled at me as I piled out. He seemed to be getting a kick out of ordering me around.

"Maybe." I slammed the door.

The cocky detective chuckled contentedly, gave me a mock salute, then sailed from the curb with screaming tires.

"Don't catch any lions you can't hold, son," he jeered. "And be there at one."

I returned the salute with a drooping thumb, pivoted, and walked down to the next corner in search of a cab.

CHAPTER IV

I HAD taken special pains to remember the address I had found of Charley Lee, the Colonel's ex-houseboy. That was one angle, I realized, that no one had yet bothered to investigate. When my cabby pulled to a stop, we were way out on the edge of town near the Hialeah track in a spot where widely separated dilapidated looking little houses were surrounded by carefully tended truck gardens. Up until the war, this had been the one place on earth where Chinese and Japs had got along together, cultivating their gardens side by side in perfect peace.

Where the paved road stopped and a coral drive led up to a tiny shack half hidden in a clump of scrub pine, I got out, paid my fare, and started walking. There was nary a sign of life about the cabin, but I didn't want to announce my arrival.

On the rickety front porch I paused, knocked on the unpainted frame door, and listened for sounds of stirring inside. I waited a long time. My eyes had left the door and begun to wander.

"Come right on in, Mr. Bowen!"

I recognized the voice before I whirled and stared into his face. Tall, composed, and smiling, the Colonel's lawyer stood in the open doorway.

Glancing at him briefly, I stepped inside without a word. Harris motioned me to a straight-backed chair. Like an obedient child, I sat down. I was so stunned I couldn't even think.

Pivoting, Harris gave me a cordial once-over, then pulled out a silver cigarette case. "Smoke?" he said.

I grabbed one silently, lit it, and held the match for the lean lawyer. His hands were as steady as frozen custard.

"Mr. Bowen," he began, blowing smoke into the air, "I would like to talk business for a moment or two. Do you mind?"

"Shoot," I tried to seem disinterested.

"Colonel Herrick, before he died, told me of his plan of hiring you. I felt that it was a good idea. In fact, one might say that I recommended you, because of your reputation in and about Miami."

He was a smooth character. I took the compliment without a word and waited for what was to come.

"Unfortunately," he continued, "there are certain elements within the family who do not feel as I do about your position within the family circle. They, to be quite frank, feel that you should be released, to save any embarrassment in case the details of last night's misfortune should get into the papers.

"Briefly, Mr. Bowen, I have been commissioned by these same members of the late Colonel's family to see that you are well paid and to make certain that you are not further involved in the Herrick affairs. Do I make myself clear?" He smiled again.

"Perfectly." It couldn't have been any plainer. He paused. "Then what do you say?"

"How much?"

His tone was businesslike. "One thousand dollars."

I blew another cloud of smoke across the room and did some quick thinking. Then, slowly, I rose to my feet, started across the carpet, and headed for the door.

"No sale!" I said curtly over my shoulder.

As my hand touched the doorknob, there was hardly a sound behind me. The

door cracked open and I started to step out into the bright sunlight, when suddenly, with the sharpness of splintering timber, something inside my head exploded and the yellow sunlight turned to inky blackness.

THE pungent odor of spilled gasoline and the acrid smell of burning pine awakened me. I was on my feet before my eyes even had time to focus. Staring wildly about the room, I saw what was up. Ahead of me, the front wall and door were a livid sheet of flame.

Smoke stung my eyes. Whirling about, I stumbled backward through the tiny room until my feet smacked something lying on the floor. I fell again flat on my face.

The thing I struck was soft and yielding, and I was now lying beside it. Raising to my elbow, I peered at it through the yard of thickening smoke. My blood suddenly ran cold. The thing lying there was a human body, a man, Chinese, and very dead. The hair of his scalp was already singed and burning.

I retched, pulled myself to my feet, and careened drunkenly toward the opposite wall. Glass splintered about my head, and I tumbled into the cool open air.

I lay on the ground a minute catching my breath. Then I stood, stumbled away from the burning walls, and headed for the clump of pine. Already I could hear voices—someone had spotted the fire. I reached the grove of scrub trees and fell down exhausted.

When I had lain there for a few minutes I rose again, glanced at my watch. It was already past twelve. Skirting the edge of a field, I spied in the distance a farmer loading some vegetables onto a little truck. Walking over, I pulled a wad of bills out of my pocket and held them in front of his face.

"Twenty bucks to take me into the city," I said.

The Chinese took one look at it and jerked his thumb at the front seat. I climbed in and relaxed against the cushions.

IN THE city I headed for the nearest pay phone and dialed Mark. His husky voice answered the ring.

"This is Bill, Mark," I said quickly. "Got anything more on the Herrick business?"

Mark's answer was a healthy laugh. "I've about decided to call that one a dead duck, Bill," he said. "I had the coroner recheck the chest and larynx. He didn't find a thing. No bruises on the throat, and a chest full of phlegm. So he wasn't choked to death, and therefore obviously must have died a natural death as the result of his asthma."

I hesitated a moment.

"Funny thing, though," Mark went on then, "what a guy can dig out of the family graveyard once he starts lookin' up the vital statistics."

My ears perked up. "What do you mean?"

Mark chuckled. "Remember the glamor girl, Miss Post? The one who was afraid her virtue was threatened by the houseboy? It seems she ain't exactly the old maid we'd typed her for. She's a married lady!"

The news didn't excite me much.

Mark chuckled once again. "And get this, Bill. Her name ain't Miss Post at all. It's Mrs. Harris."

It took a full second to register on my slightly battered mind. Then I fairly shouted it. "What?"

"Yeah," Mark went on, obviously enjoying himself. "They were married twelve years ago, up at Tampa. Been separated eight years."

I was speechless. A thousand little bits of remembered items went spinning through my head, all in the moment or two that Mark stopped talking. A few of the little bits were beginning to make some kind of a pattern now, slowly but painfully, like the pieces of a puzzle.

"And that ain't all." Mark's voice woke me up.

I drew a heavy breath. "Shoot."

"It seems that Cupid finally got our friend Henry Crowell, too, although it's been kept a secret. He's been married almost a month—to a frail by the name of Kitty Melville, a dancer. She works at the Pelican Club. Quite a dish. Saw her act once—fans."

The pieces in the puzzle began to move about again. Wearily but excitedly, my fast-moving mind watched the outline begin to take shape.

There was a long pause. Then I was speaking, "Listen, Mark. Do me one final favor."

He laughed again "S'matter? Got some-

thing too hot to handle again?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no," I responded. "But do me just this one last favor, and have old Doc Whitehead out at the mansion for the inquest at one o'clock."

Mark's tone was a little more serious. "O. K.," he assented. "Then he added, laughing again, 'But let me in on it if you think you're about to trap the lion in his den. I want to see the fight!'"

"You'll be in on it, all right," I promised and hung up.

I closed my eyes and leaned against the booth to think a moment. Somewhere in the back of my head a giant picture puzzle was spread out on a table. The entire picture was complete—except for one piece. A hand was stretching out across the table holding the last jagged piece. It moved toward the empty gap in the puzzle.

I never found out whether it fitted. There was a sudden impatient knock outside the booth, I opened my eyes to stare at a flustered female, and as I stepped out of the little swinging door the vision was gone.

But I was pretty darned sure, all the same, the piece would fit.

THERE was just time enough for me to grab a bite to eat before taking another cab back out to the Herrick mansion. From the cars parked beyond the coral post entrance and next to the house, I could tell that the others had already arrived. Mark's squad car was behind my jalopy. Behind it was Doc Whitehead's shiny sedan.

Mark had the company already assembled in the living room. When he spied me, he nodded his head and began.

"Not much more needs to be said," he announced to the group. "I have called you together again merely to exonerate all those in the household who might be considered responsible for Colonel Herrick's death."

There was a long pause during which everyone looked at the other. I could see George Freeman and his wife breathe a sigh of relief. Looking around the room, I counted noses. Over against the far wall Harris was making elaborate precautions to avoid my eyes.

Mark went on, "I had the coroner check on the autopsy. There is nothing new to report. The finding is that Colonel Herrick died a natural death which was

caused by asthmatic strangulation. If there are no questions, you are all dismissed."

Mark paused and waited for voices, while I took one more glance about the room. Then I wet my lips, cleared my voice, and spoke up, "Where is Miss Vail?"

Everyone turned and glanced about the walls. There was an awkward silence.

"Miss Vail is slightly indisposed. She asked to be excused." It was the nurse, Miss Post, who spoke.

Everyone stared at her, while I passed Mark a significant gesture. He got the idea.

"Doctor Whitehead," he said to the physician seated near the door. "Would you see Miss Vail and determine whether she is physically able to attend this inquest? Unless she is really sick, she is required to."

The dignified old medico stood up and started forward. But suddenly Mr. Big, the Colonel's nephew, crossed in front of him.

"Never mind, Doctor," he said politely. "I think I can persuade Miss Vail to come in for a moment."

The old doctor took his seat again, and the room relaxed. We waited a long time. We heard Crowell's footsteps mount the stairs, and the closing of a door. Then all was silence. A murmured conversation started up in the living room. I glanced at Mark. He was lighting another cigarette. I pulled one out, tried to light it, fumbled the match, and gave it up.

"Excuse me a moment, please." It was Harris, the lawyer, who rose now and crossed the room. Mark nodded his head at him. We heard his footsteps also climb the stairs.

I don't know how long it was before the next sound came. Maybe five minutes, maybe ten. But when it came the whole company suddenly shot to its feet.

There was a harsh scream, the sudden roar of an engine, and a hoarse male shout. Everyone in the room scrambled for the front windows.

BEING the first to arrive at the big corner window, I got a grandstand view of the whole thing. The station wagon, with two figures huddled in the front seat, came careening madly around the side of the house, onto the lawn past the parked cars, and toward the coral

posts that marked the entrance way.

At first I didn't see Harris. He came running around the other side of the house, racing for the speeding car. He jumped on the running board just as it reached the end of Doc Whitehead's sedan. As the station wagon swerved back onto the gravel, we could see Harris and Mr. Big struggling at the wheel for control of the car.

Neither won out. When the careening station wagon reached the end of the gravel, suddenly it lurched, swerved, and headed for the right coral post. The horrible crash resounded even inside the living room. Harris's body made a neat arc in the air and landed out of sight in the shrubbery.

When the smoke cleared away, Mr. Big was stretched halfway through the window glass, his long lean body draped across the engine hood. Margaret Vail had sunk beneath the seats.

There was another scream, this time in the room, somewhere behind me. Pivoting, I turned around to stare down at the shapeless figure of Miss Post huddled awkwardly on the floor.

I looked at Mark.

"Well," I breathed slowly, "there are your lions, wise guy, the four unconscious ones. Don't tell me I didn't let you in on it!"

Mark stared at the window, the nurse, the window again, and then me.

"The Vail dame?" he murmured unbelievably.

"Yeah," I answered. "She was the hot clue."

The big redhead shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid I don't quite get it."

"You will," I promised, "as soon as you buy me that drink."

Mark's not so dumb. "What drink?" he demanded guardedly.

"That drink that you're going to buy me," was my reply.

"YOU might as well start at the beginning, Bill," Mark said a little later, when he, Doc Whitehead, George Browning, and I were settled comfortably behind a bottle of Mark's Scotch in his private office. "How was the Colonel murdered?"

Instead of answering immediately, I turned to Doc Whitehead, who was unwrapping another cigar.

"What would the odor of ordinary fuel

gas do to an asthma sufferer?" I asked.

The old medico frowned. "Probably start a severe coughing spell," he replied quickly. "If it were strong enough, it might even kill him. Any kind of gas is highly irritant to the throat and chest of an asthma patient."

I looked at Mark. "There's your answer. The Colonel was killed by a good dose of gas."

"How?" Mark shot back.

I took another swallow. "It was really very simple the way it was worked. Remember the gas burner in the Colonel's room?"

Mark nodded his head.

"When I went to the Colonel's room after the killing, the burner was still warm, although sometime in the night it had been turned off. Also the window sill was wet from the rain earlier in the night, although the windows were closed. The two sets of facts didn't jibe.

"I got to wondering about that the minute I noticed it. So I took a trip to the garage to have a look at the bottled gas tank. On it I noticed there was a little valve, which could control the flow of gas to the house. Right then I knew how the Colonel had died. The radiator had been left burning in his room at bedtime, someone had sneaked out to the garage, turned off the gas and given the fire time to die, then turned on the gas again. Thus the Colonel's room became a deadly gas chamber."

"But I thought you said the windows had been open, that there was rain on the sill. Wouldn't the gas escape?" Mark interrupted.

"They were," I assented. "But after the killing. Someone had to air the room, to eliminate the odor of gas. That was where Miss Post came in. Crowell stood guard in the hall to see that no one interrupted things from that side."

"Then who was out in the garage?" It was George Browning who spoke up this time.

"Either Harris or Margaret Vail," I replied quietly.

At this Doc Whitehead turned, glared at me, and suddenly exploded. "Nonsense!" he roared. "I know Miss Vail personally. She did no such thing!"

Mark and I exchanged glances. "You're quite right, Doctor," I went on then. "I called her Miss Vail out of force of habit. I mean, of course, the young lady you

examined in the station wagon after the accident—Kitty Melville, Henry Crowell's new wife. The real Margaret Vail, I'm sorry to report, is dead. She was killed, I think, by Henry Crowell. Her body was found out on the breakwater this morning."

I pulled the almost forgotten celluloid hairpin out of my pocket. "By the way, Mark, you might have your laboratory check on the blood on this. It will probably check with Miss Vail's."

Mark stuck the little pin into an envelope, then sat back again. I turned to Browning, smiling. "You almost stopped me from finding that bit of evidence."

Fat Boy suddenly looked embarrassed. "I saw you swipe the letter from the Colonel's desk," he explained. "I knew you were a stranger in the house. I thought I'd better get it back."

There was a brief pause while I waited for the next query. Mark finally sprung it, "All of which brings us to the motive. The Colonel, Margaret Vail, and the Chinese houseboy. Why all the wholesale slaughter?"

I POURED myself another drink from the bottle of dwindling Scotch. Then I turned again to the old physician.

"Doc Whitehead here is the one who really set me wise to that," I explained. "You remember, Doctor, that you told me that you had witnessed the Colonel's will recently, the terms of which returned the bulk of his estate to Margaret Vail. As soon as I heard that I began to catch on."

"I began watching the so-called Miss Vail very closely. Two things clinched my hunch. The first thing was that she suddenly became very anxious for me to leave the place. That wasn't natural, nor was it natural that she should be spying on me from her window. And the second clincher came when I asked her for a drink and she couldn't find where the liquor was kept in the pantry. Right then I was certain something was wrong with Miss Vail."

I looked back at Mark. "Of course, when you told me that Crowell and this Melville dame were recently married, and that Miss Post was actually Harris's

wife, the whole business became clear. Crowell and Harris, seeing that the Colonel's money was going to Margaret Vail after his death, hitched up the plot. Just before the new guests arrived last evening, they did away with the real Miss Vail and fixed up Crowell's new wife to take her place. Since very few visitors ever came to the Colonel's house, no one would be the wiser after the Colonel was dead. The new Miss Vail—Crowell's wife—would inherit the money.

"It was an almost perfect setup. There were only two minor obstacles. One was the Chinese houseboy, who, if left around the house, would be able to identify the real Miss Vail. Hence Miss Post's little story cooked up ahead of time to get rid of him."

I turned once more to the old doctor. "The second obstacle, Doctor Whitehead, was you. After I found they had got rid of Charley Lee and I couldn't use him for identification, I tried to think of someone else. You were the only other living person about Miami, I imagine, who was acquainted with the real Margaret Vail."

"That explains the grand climax. Crowell got panicky and took it on the lam with his new wife, leaving Harris and Miss Post to hold the bag. But it just happened that Harris got wise. Thanks to him, no one had to even fire a shot."

Finally, as Fat Boy and Doc Whitehead rose, I couldn't resist the temptation to rub it into Mark a little.

"As neat a job of perfectly bloodless detecting as I ever saw—if I do say so myself," I added, reaching for my hat. Then I turned for one more triumphant glance at the redhead slumped behind the desk.

"But I'm surprised at you, Mark," I went on chiding. "I'm afraid you're slipping. Where are your powers of detection? You admitted you saw Miss Melville dance once, yet you didn't remember her when you met face to face. How come?"

"I told you she was using fans, you dope," Mark growled back. "I wasn't lookin' at her face."

He had me there.



Ole Man Moneyhun would never recognize his cloaked robber unless he could. . .

Finger the Phantom

By Stallard Jones



OLE MAN MONEYHUN. That was what he was called when spoken of by the inhabitants of Cashaw Valley. To his face, he was called Mister Moneyhun.

Small, grey, plump and round-shouldered, all the features of his face slightly bulbous, his blue eyes twinkly and crinkly, he was famed throughout the valley for his ability to remark correctly upon the peculiarities of any absent inhabitant who, perchance, was the subject of a conversation.

Men marveled at this ability of Ole Man Moneyhun's. What color is Jeff Oliver's eyes, blue? No, grey. Is Elijah Bishop right or left-handed? Left-handed. Which breast pocket does Henry Failen carry his spectacles in? Right'n.

"Why I can't even tell you offhand," one inhabitant would say to another, "whose picture is on a dollar bill!"

For twenty-odd years, Ole Man Moneyhun had run a general merchandise store at Tadpole Crossing, a spot centrally located in the valley, and so named because here the main road and only creek of the valley crossed.

Tonight—dusk of a February Saturday—as was his custom at the end of a week, Ole Man Moneyhun, by the light of a dingy bulb suspended from the overhead ceiling, stood emptying his cash register. Darkly, his shadow fell across the counter, bobbling grotesquely with his movement, while shadows, still and grey, filled the corners, nooks and crannies of the store. It was out of one of these still and grey nooks that there now suddenly materialized a dark, moving shadow—a huge, black barrel-like thing, the height of a tall man.

Soundlessly, this moved toward Ole Man Moneyhun. Probably sensing the

presence, Ole Man Moneyhun glanced up. His eyes widened. He thrust his round, grey head forward, to peer.

"Just take it easy, Ole Fellow," came a wheezy whisper. "Don't get excited and start something I'll have to finish. Raise your hands!"

By this time the dark, shapeless mass had come within the circle of light cast by the dingy bulb. Hardly recognizable as such, admittedly, the thing was a man, nevertheless.

A black, cloaklike affair, falling from beneath a black hat, draped his entire body. Through two small holes cut in the cloak, his eyes glinted like ice reflecting a red, setting sun. Through a slit in the right front of the cloak, a black-gloved fist jutted, holding a gun.

"I said, 'raise your hands'!" came the wheezy whisper again. "Don't stand there staring!"

Slowly, still staring, Ole Man Moneyhun raised his hands. The black-hatted man advanced until his bulky front touched the counter.

"Now take the rest of the money out of that machine and place it on that already on the counter, then hand it all to me," directed the wheezy whisper.

Obediently, Ole Man Moneyhun began to take bills out of the cash register drawer. Black-and-bulky leaned across the counter and watched to see that all compartments were cleaned. Then Ole Man Moneyhun placed the bills from the cash register on the ones already on the counter, and took up the stack.

Through a slit on the left front of the cloak, Black-and-bulky's left hand emerged, black-gloved, and reached to receive the money. Ole Man Moneyhun placed it in Black-and-bulky's outstretched hand. An instant later he had grasped the fingers of that hand suddenly and bent them the way they weren't made to be bent. They popped and cracked.



Savagely, Black-and-bulky lashed out with the gun. It struck Ole Man Moneyhun's round, grey head just over the left ear. He crumpled behind his counter. . .

UNDER the dingy bulb suspended from the ceiling over Ole Man Moneyhun's cash register, the gaunt face of the Sheriff of Cashaw Valley worked. It was now past midnight. Ole Man Moneyhun, himself, had 'phoned the sheriff after reviving from the blow on the head.

"I'm sure the man's from the valley here," Ole Man Moneyhun was saying. "He knew I kept my money for the week here in the cash register. Also, he was disguised beyond all recognition. He even spoke in a whisper."

"How much did you say he got?" asked the sheriff.

"Around twelve hundred dollars."

"And you don't think you'd be able to recognize him if he walked right in here now?" the sheriff said.

"I'm afraid not," admitted Ole Man Moneyhun with a sigh. "The only thing I know about him is that the fingers of his left hand are sprained."

"That isn't much. Unless they have swelled, you can't tell whether a man's fingers are sprained by looking at them. Say you bent them backwards?"

"Yes. That was when he hit me."

"I'll tell you what," said the sheriff earnestly. "Tomorrow and next day I'll go visiting about the valley. If I see any swollen fingers, I'll investigate the cause thoroughly."

"That might work," Ole Man Moneyhun agreed. "Anyhow, that's about as

much as you can do. Meanwhile, I'll be observant here in the store."

Sunday arrived and passed. And Monday afternoon came. As yet, neither the sheriff of Cashaw Valley nor Ole Man Moneyhun had spotted a suspect.

During the week end, word of the robbery had spread over the valley. This Monday afternoon, Tadpole Crossing teemed with inhabitants. Outside Ole Man Moneyhun's general merchandise store, a dozen cars could be counted, and the hitch rack was lined with saddle horses. Men stood about in small groups, talking in hush-hush tones. After all, the perpetrator of the crime was amongst them unknown.

Inside the store, more inhabitants milled, buying sugar, coffee, shortening, garments, print cloth, plow points, and horse harnesses. Here and there scurried Ole Man Moneyhun, waiting on this customer, waiting on that customer, and observing the fingers of the left hand of each as he did so. Now he weighed up a pound of loose coffee for Elijah Bishop.

"It's too bad about what happened," remarked Bishop.

"Thank you," Ole Man Moneyhun replied.

"You say whoever it was wore a black hat and a black cloak?"

Ole Man Moneyhun nodded his round, grey head—studying the fingers of Bishop's left hand.

"I'll bet he knows you well, whoever he is all right," continued Bishop. "That's why he covered up that way. He was afraid you would be able to recognize him later if he only used something over his face."

Then big Bill Jackson bought a pair of overalls. "How's your head, Mister Moneyhun?" he inquired.

"It feels better today, thank you." Ole Man Moneyhun glanced at the fingers of the left hand of Big Bill Jackson.

"I hear he was as big as I," continued Jackson.

"I think he had on a heavy overcoat under the cloak," replied Ole Man Moneyhun. His blue eyes crinkled.

THEN came Zeke Baleford who asked for a plug of chewing tobacco, remarking, "Heard you were robbed Saturday night. Have any idea yet who done it?"

"I'm afraid not," sighed Ole Man Moneyhun. Warily, he looked at the fingers of Baleford's left hand.

"From what I hear, he was as smart as people say you are," Baleford continued. "I don't believe you'll ever catch him!" Baleford drew his wallet from his right hip pocket, slipped a bill out with his thumb, and reached it toward Ole Man Moneyhun.

His round, grey head thrust forward, Ole Man Moneyhun just stood there, peering steadily at Baleford. "I've caught him now," Ole Man Moneyhun said. "You robbed me!"

Suddenly, there was quiet in the millinery room.

"Hear him!" laughed Baleford. "Accuses me of robbing him Saturday night—"

"It was you!" said Ole Man Moneyhun, his voice rising. "I can prove it! Sheriff!"

Baleford lunged into the crowd. He didn't get far, however. Many hands caught and held him, and pushed him back to face Ole Man Moneyhun.

"Let's see if Mister Moneyhun can prove it," several men said.

The sheriff shouldered through. Quickly he glanced at the fingers of Baleford's left hand. Then he looked at Ole Man Moneyhun. "Are—are you sure, Mister Moneyhun—"

"Aw, I done it, all right," said Baleford. "I don't guess there's any use denying it. The ole buzzard has recognized me someway. I was afraid of that. I'd give him his money—"

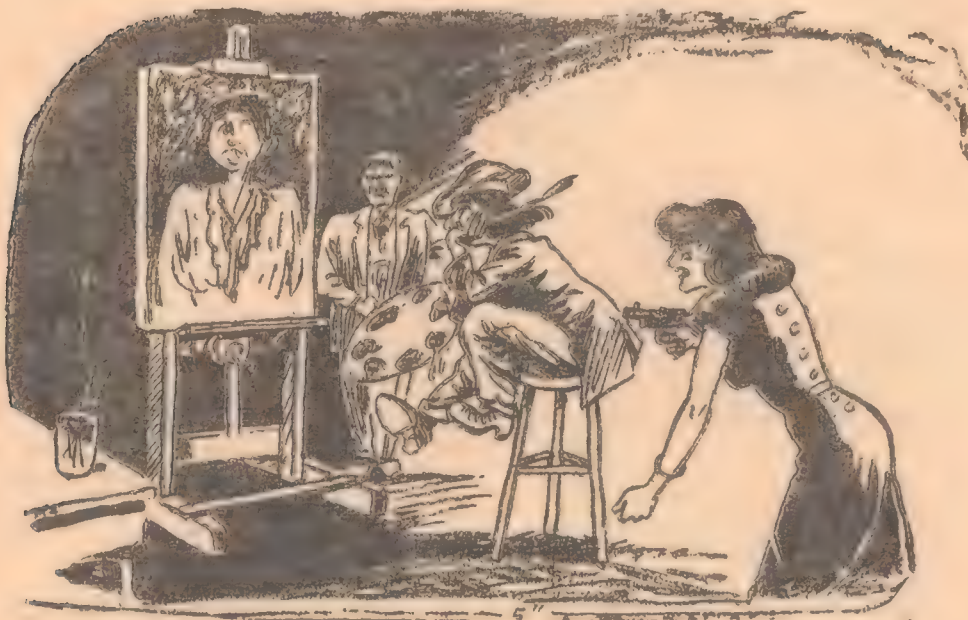
"I—his fingers aren't swollen," the sheriff said. "How—I mean—"

"I know his fingers aren't swollen," said Ole Man Moneyhun. "I doubt if his fingers are even sore now. But they have been. During my life I've observed that once a man starts carrying his wallet in a certain pocket, he seldom changes that pocket unless there's a reason for doing so. As long as I've known Zeke Baleford, he has carried his wallet in his left pocket. Just now he pulled it from his right hip pocket."

Ole Man Moneyhun's bulbous features creased with a smile and his blue eyes crinkled and twinkled. "What better reason would you want for that than sprained fingers of the left hand?"

"Welcome Homicide, Louie!"

"Alvin Hinkey" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

To greet a returning G.I., the D.A.'s doffiest detective drags him along to the next homicide binge. And nearly gets his pal handed the keys to the city's cadaver cooler.

HAMBONE NOONAN and I walk into the precinct house one night and get the surprise of our lives. No, it is not a fresh corpse stretched out on the floor, but Louis Garfinkle in the flesh. Louis has five Hershey bars on his sleeve, and plenty of fruit salad on his massive bosom. He has filled out since we saw him off to the wars. His face shows all the signs that he has not been in Africa and Italy just to study the customs of the people.

"Why, Louie," Hambone Noonan yelps and sticks out his big paw. "An' you didn' even lose a leg?"

"If I had, beetlehead," Louis says, "I would of brought it home an' wrapped it about your neck. You look dumber

than you did pre-war, Hambone. Alvin, you been overestimatin' the big goon even in your let—"

"Ha," I says. "How was the gondolas in Venice, huh?"

"I bet he left a lot of 'em broken-hearted, Alvin," Noonan grins.

Louie shakes his head. He says to me, "Same old Noonan. Should I tell him how I hated to leave Florence and how I robbed a Venetian blind?"

"So what harm was there?" Hambone says. "Everybody is black-marketin' over there. When you really goin' to git out, Louie?"

"It'll take me about as long as the last rap I hung on a guy," Louie says. "About ninety days. You know what? The com-

missioner gimme my badge back. I got it in my pocket. It is goin' to be fun workin' with Hambone again. After what I been through I need laughs like a guy who has sat through eight Karloff pitchers. Well, well, the joint ain't changed much."

"Well, welcome home," I says.

"An welcome homicide," a big cop says, comin' in. "A rich guy was just found knocked off in one of them private brownstones in the Chelsea district. Why don't you go along with the D. A.'s dopes, Louie? You must be as rusty as a flivver that has been in an empty lot for ten years."

"You think the boss'd mind?" Louie asks. "I could maybe try out a P-38 pistol I frisked offen a dead Nazi at Cassino."

"I dunno," Hambone says, making sure he has his Roscoe. "It ain't exactly—"

"He has a badge," I says. "An' some brains which we will need."

"Alvin," Louie says, "you sure got on the ball since I been gone, an' that ain't no army chicken I am handin' you."

"He is gettin' too smart for his rōmpers," Hambone says. "What has he been writin' you about me, huh?"

"Huh? Just would be askin' too much for me to bring him some art treasures, Noonan," Louis says, winking at me. "But is this the way to solve a murder? Seems funny. I killed a hun'ed Krauts I bet, an' didn't have to think up even one alibi. I left my prints all over the gun, too. If I had it here, I bet Noonan would not be able to find one, huh?"

Noonan bites his nails and his eyebrows jump. "Awright, Louie, so use all your needles. We'll see who gits the most clues where we are goin'."

"I mean the right ones," Louis says. It is good to have him back.

WWE ALL go down to an old crummy brownstone on West Twenty-fourth Street. It looks like vampires had held a gallop in it only the night before. The furniture must have gone out of date about the time Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg. In a very dingy room on the second floor we find the deceased with the county's stiff appraiser kneeling beside him.

"How was the murder done?" Hambone asks, hooking his thumbs in the armholes of his vest.

"They didn't use a rubber band and a

cud of gum," the medical citizen sniffs. "Somebody used a shiv and drove it quite deep into his pot roast. Oh, hello, Noonan. Couldn't the D. A. find somebody else who wasn't playin' poker? Why, if it ain't Louie Garfunkle! Put 'er there, Louie!"

"Lay down the shiv," Louie says. "I had quite a time keepin' this right hand where I been."

"Pardon me," the corpse analyst grins.

We get to work. The defunct person used to go by the name of Mandril Quirk. A very scared butler tells us Quirk was a connoisseur of famous paintings. Whoever slew him had stolen a very old painting which all other whatever-you-call-them's had been trying to buy or steal from him for weeks.

"Most art dealers never believed he had it," the butler says. "It got lost for centuries. But of late the master was in financial difficulties and was weighing the idea of selling the picture. I promised the master I'd never breathe the name of the painting to anyone. It seems a friend of his brought it from abroad an'—"

"We'll go grill her," Hambone says. "She—"

I look at Louie. He claps his hands to his noggin, then tells Chitney, the butler, to go on as we are trying to listen.

"What did I say?" Hambone asks.

"The master never really told the art dealers what the name of the painting was," the flunky says. "He gave them a peek just to prove to them it was cracked in spots, it was that old."

"We better investigate, Alvin," Hambone says. "You an' Louie keep people out while I—"

"Hasn't changed a bit, Alvin," Louie says. "This should be fun. Lyin' in foxholes, I dreamed of the day when I would once more see the mental deficit in action."

Hambone and the cops cannot find any clues. Louie suggests that all of the late Quirk's employees be herded into the room and questioned. The butler says that besides himself, Mandril Quirk had an old housekeeper named Lucretia Blodger.

I shiver. Somewhere I heard of a dame with a handle like that. I ask Louie about it.

"Yeah. She was a tough cupcake, Alvin. She carried arsenic around with her,

as at parties she did not think dukes an' other royal jerks got stiff on wine soon enough. Huh, this is almost uncanny, huh? Look, Chitney, bring Lucretia."

Chitney calls the babe. She comes in without making any more sound than a goose feather lighting on an inner-spring mattress. She is as thin as beany maple syrup and has a long bony face with a pair of eyes that Louie says reminds him of mummies he has seen in the catacombs. She wears a long black dress and about enough hair to stuff a Bull Durham bag with. I feel little mice wearing spurs running up and down my spine.

Hambone gets his voice working on the third try. It is as squeaky as an auto spring needing grease. "Er—where was you when Quirk was rubbed out, sister?"

The old doll's nose twitches like a rabbit's. "I was out to a nightclub, clam-head, doin' the conga. Where you think? I was up on the top floor in my room, that's where I was. I was feedin' my pet armadillo. Did you ever see one that was friendly with a white rat? Now, if you don't mind, I'll go up and feed Cesario."

"Bring the guy down here. I ast for everybody in this joint to show!" Hambone snaps.

"Ravens don't like mos' people," Lucretia says.

"A raven?" Louie gulps. "Is this a movie we come into by mistake, Alvin? See if Peter Lorry is anywhere in sight?"

"If you don't mind," the medical examiner says, snapping his black reticule shut, "I remembered I had a pie in the oven—I mean I promised the old lady I'd watch it to see—well, he was killed by a stab wound—been dead about eleven hours. Good day!"

HAMBONE wipes his face with a big hanky and tries to stop shaking. The old babe sits down and folds her bony hands. We hear something squawk upstairs. Lucretia says, "He is gettin' impatient and will be very angry at me."

"L-look," Hambone says to a cop, "git me a hamburger, huh? P-put some ketchup on it. I always steady my nerves when I eat somethin'. That dame has made me feel hollow inside anyways. You sit down, too, Chitney!"

"I happen to be, Mister. I am not standing in a hole, you know."

"Yeah, ha ha," Noonan chokes out. "Now, let's stop foolin' around. Murder

has been done here. Chitney, nobody ast you yet where you were when the master was killed, did he?"

"I was also in my room," the menial replies. "I have a hobby, you know. Sometime perhaps you would like to see my collection of poisonous spiders."

"I would not!" Noonan howls. "Ugh! No wonder somebody got killed here. One of you two is guilty as—"

"Look, Hambone," Louie says. "The citizen waiting for the morgue bassinet was stabbed an' not poisoned, remember?"

"Oh, yeah? I'll take an autopsy of him an' see if he wa'n't given a shot of arsenic before he got the shiv. Crooks mislead you that way!"

"Why kill a character twice, Noonan?" I ask. "An assassin generally can't take that much time. Come on, Louie, we might find some clues."

We are searching for something to go on when the cop comes in and gives Hambone a hamburger. Noonan sits down and takes a big bite out of the wimpy and stares at Chitney. Louie says it looks like an inside job and asks the butler if all employees have been accounted for.

"Yes, I believe—oh, there is a young lady who has been working part time for Mr. Quirk. Comes in at odd times, three or four days a week. She—"

"Yeah?" Noonan says. "An' maybe this was an odd time for her to come in. That shiv blade was long an' thin. Even a frail could've jabbed it into the deceased's brisket as deep as it was. Call her up, Jitney."

"Very well, sir, but the name is Chitney."

Lucretia Blodger just sits and stares at the corpse. I hear noises upstairs. Something comes bump-bump-bump down the stairs. When it gets nearer, it sounds like a baby tank and Noonan grabs me. Then an armadillo crawls into the room and blinks its little eyes at us.

Louie asks do I remember the movie called *Dracula* where vampires got out of their graves in a cellar at night while the armor-plated animals cavorted about the basement. I says for him to shut up and hold my teeth in.

"Ain't he cute?" the old babe nasals. "He won't stay away from me too long. Come here, Rasputin."

"I think I'll hurry along, Alvin," Louie

says. "I could be at Camp Dix in a few hours. I—"

Chitney comes back into the room. He says the secretary will be right over. He sits down and cracks his knuckles. The armadillo climbs into Lucretia's lap. It seems to get darker in the room. Some citizens come in with a wicker crib and remove the corpse. One throws the sheet in my face and I almost scream.

"Let's talk about anythin', Alvin," Louie says. "Say, I had a buddy in the tank corps who got a date with a swell cupcake in Florence one night. This babe tells Doozie she has a friend for me the nex' time. She gives Doozie a pitcher of the babe to show me. Man, I feasted my lamps on that pitcher. All the flicker chicks couldn't git to first base with her. I finally lost the pitcher one night while ridin' in a gondola in Venice. I will never forget that. Well, when me an' Doozie went back to Florence, Doozie's gal says her friend beat it to the Riviera or some place. Those are the breaks I always git."

"I'm still shakin', Louie," I says. "You got another story?"

"One of these three done it," Hambone says. "We will sweat it out of whoever it was. We don't have to go no farther than right here. Look, was there anybody here last night tryin' to buy this old paintin', Chitney?"

"Two persons called," the butler says. "Up until about ten o'clock. I went to bed at that time, as always at ten on the dot I have to feed my black widows."

"You have to—ugh!" Hambone says. Louie Garfinkle drops a cigarette on the floor and bends over fast to keep the old musty rug from going up. He bends over so long I wonder if he has a crick in his back.

NOONAN crams the last of the hamburger into his big mouth and starts working again. "Chitney, you know where to reach them art praisers who visited the deceased last night? You git them over here. We'll finish this job without movin' from this house!"

"The way you work," Louie says, "you better sign a ninety-nine year lease." He goes into the next room.

Noonan takes ganders at the paintings on the wall. "Which one was stole?" he asks. Chitney says it was one that was not framed yet. Quirk kept it rolled up and locked in the drawer of his big desk.

Lucretia starts tapping out a very eerie tune on the back of the pet armadillo, and I get the ague once more.

Then I look at the door that goes into the room where Louie went to mooch around. There is Louie looking out at me. He is as pale as the inside of grape fruit rind. He beckons to me. "Hambone," he says as I leave my chair, "me an' Alvin will case this joint in here in case the crooks got in that way."

"You won't find nothin'," Noonan sniffs. "The killer was invited in. Even I can see that. But go ahead as you two do not seem to be of no help here."

I get into the dingy den with Louie. There is some sunlight coming in through some cracks in the drawn shade of a window. Louie holds something in the palm of his hand. I don't get it. Louie says he did not expect me to the first try.

"Alvin, look! The artist who painted that pitcher long long ago must of put the colors on thick, as this piece chipped off the canvas. Look close. You will see it is an eye."

"Huh? An eye? Why, it is. It scares me, Louie, to say the least."

"Alvin, you have known me a long time, ain't you? I do not kid around murders. I have seen this eye before, Alvin. The other one was just as spooky. I know the name of the paintin' that was stole by the citizen who rubbed out Quirk. I saw it in an art gallery in Florence, Alvin. It is called *Mona Lisa's Mother*. It was called by the character who showed me around the oldest paintin' in oil in the world. I guess you realize it has to be bein' of Mona Lisa's ma, huh?"

"Let me sit down, Louie," I says. "Before you go ahead some more. This dame Mona Lisa got famous by amilin' over somethin' nobody could figure out, huh? People went nuts decidin' what she was grinnin' at an' what for."

"Check, Alvin. Her ma was famous for the awful dirty look she wore when she heard Lucretia Borgia had said somethin' nasty about her. Lik. I said, the paintin' of Mona Lisa come after the one that was snitched. You know how much the one of Mona was worth and still is."

"I wouldn't know," I admit. "So where do we go from here, Louie? You don't think Lucretia in there is a descendant of this Mona Lisa, do you? Maybe her daughter or gran—"

“Alvin, nothin’ is impossible these days unless it is Hambone Noonan.”

“She shivved Mandril Quirk?”

“You couldn’t put nothin’ past the old crow,” Louie says. “I suspect everybody so far. What is happenin’ out there? Noonan—”

We rush out. Hambone has a citizen by the nape of the neck and is shaking him. The newcomer is a little runt wearing striped pants and a frock coat. His cheaters are dangling from a vest pocket and banging against his knees. Louie asks what is going on. Hambone says he has the guilty citizen.

“You have proven it?” I asks pleasantly enough.

“He comes in here an’ I spotted blood on his shirt cuff,” Hambone yelps. “Look, pal, come clean! You was here late last night or early in the A.M. and slew Quirk! Gimme an alibi if you wasn’t Hah, killers always slip up. Laundries are still very slow even if Japan got licked last August an’—”

“I’ll admit I was here,” the little citizen says. “I came back about midnight, because I mislaid my magnifying glass with which I was examining a rare painting. Mandril Quirk was alive, I assure you, when I departed.”

“You can’t prove it!” Hambone yaps. “Did you see this jerk get shown out by your boss late last night?” he throws at the old babe. She shakes her head, and her store teeth rattle. Chitney says he retired at ten and sleeps very soundly.

“Only your word for it, hah? You sneaked in today to pay respects to a stiff you made, Guthrie Mulch!” Noonan says severely. “To throw us cops off the scent! Actin’ innocent, huh? Well, we’ll take him down and book him, Louie!”

“Er—just a minute,” I says. “Was you sittin’ in that chair there, Mr. Mulch. The one with the horsehair oozin’ out?”

Mr. Mulch nods and wipes worry moisture off his angular pan. “Well, no wonder,” I sniff. “The arm of it has ketchup on it that Noonan spilled. I imagine if we analyzed the stains on your shirt, we wouldn’t find no red corpuskles in it, only tomato seeds, ha! Hambone, you got to do better. Now start in from the beginnin’ an’—”

LOUIE GARFUNKLE sits down and laughs and shakes his head. Hambone gnaws his knuckles and kicks an

ottoman halfway across the room.

“Who comes in next?” I ask Chitney.

“The other art appraiser is out of town for the day,” the gentleman’s gent informs us. “However, Miss Mafia said she would come over as quickly as she could. I doubt if she is of any importance, though.”

“Lemme be the judge of that,” Noonan says, trying to pull himself together all over again. “Everybody mixed up where a corpse was found is guilty until proved she did it. That is—I mean—look, Madam, do you have to file your nails on that armored possum?”

“He likes his back scratched,” Lucretia says. “An’ you’ll git your ugly face scratched if you don’t remain more civil! Do you mind if I go up and feed my raven?”

“The nex’ time I try to solve a crime,” Hambone snaps, “it will be in a zoo, I hope. What makes it so chilly in here, huh?”

We sit down and wait and just look at each other. It is no fun. There are noises all over the creepy joint, like stair risers moaning and blinds banging. Something gnaws at the woodwork near where me and Louie are sitting. We know they are not Easter bunnies.

Chitney says, “Do you mind if I run upstairs and look after my pets. Spiders like company. You can come with me if you think I’m trying to—”

“Not for a million dollars,” Noonan gulps. “Go ahead, Chitney. No, you stay here. Let’s look some more for clues, Alvin. I wisht the murderer had left the carver in the cadaver. Looks like a perfect crime.”

“Yeah,” Louie says. “They all do when you are around, Noonan. But I gotta confess I’m stumped. Who is that?”

There is a knock on the door outside. A cop comes in with a doll. I forget to exhale. She is a gorgeous dish wearing a shirt of a very black clinging material. Whoever tailored it must have run out of material too quickly. Not that nobody minded, I bet, as she has gams Broadway would insure for a cool fifty grand. She has an oval pan featuring a pair of ogles that would coax a diamond necklace out of a McPherson, and her lips are every bit as shapely as Lana Turner’s. If there ever was blacker hair on anything that ever moved it was on a black tom cat in

a coalbin at midnight. In short, she is a pip.

I hear Louie Garfunkle breathe in deeply, then stop. He clutches at the skirt of my herringbone and hangs on. "Alvin, she—"

"You're tellin' me?" I ask. Chitney says, "I am glad you have come, Miss Mafia. It was awful. I came down and found the master lyin' there. I—"

"Okay," Noonan says, his derby wobbling atop his big fat head. "Where was you last night late, sister?"

"Should I answer this person, Chitney?" the cupcake asks in a huff.

"He is a policeman, Maria."

"Incredible!" the delicious dish exclaims. I wonder why Louie does not laugh. I look at him. He still hangs on to a piece of my coat. His lower jaw is swinging loose like an oriole's nest in a March gale.

"What ails you, Louie?" I ask. "Even she is not that glamorous. Look, you've seen swell-lookin' broads before—"

"Huh? Yeah, Alvin. An' only a lousy break stopped me from seein'—let's get out of here, or I'll lose my good conduct ribbon. Ha! It is the battle fatigue gits me at times, I guess, Alvin. I got to go out and walk around."

"Well, Hambone," I says. "Excuse us for a while. Me and Louie'll be back before long. We have to feed our armadil—I mean our faces. Shall we bring you a hamburger?"

"You are as funny as a typhoid shot," Noonan says. "Awright, I can handle this."

I TAKE Louie out. Three blocks away he says for us to go into a tavern for a snort. We sit down and order the pick-up elixir. I see that Louie still shakes a little even after polishing off his jolt. "It ain't possible, Alvin!"

"What ain't?"

"What I just seen, Alvin. But they said rocket ships wasn't, too. An' automic bombs come in when nobody believed or expected they would, huh? It's a small world when you come from seein' a lot of it. Goerin' stole all the paintin's he could glom onto, so why wouldn't other citizens?"

"Make sense, Louie," I says. "Look, I should take you right home."

"Alvin, it could happen. Three months after I won eight bucks at casino I was

helpin' attack a town named Cassino. Then there was a town named Casablanca I helped take. A year to the very day after, I went to a pitcher show in Italy and saw the pitcher of the same name. So why should I tell myself things don't happen like they just did back in that creepy place. Look, Alvin, we must go now and follow that babe."

"Huh?"

"It is the doll my pal, Doozie, showed me the pitcher of. Who I was to go on a double date with, only she up and went A.W.O.L. to the Riviera. The babe is a B.T.O. like we used to say over there, Alvin. A big time operator."

"Look, Louie, just let Alvin do what he knows is best, huh? I will see you to your house an'—"

"You follow me, Alvin Hinkley!" Louie says. "I will show you whether I am nuts or not."

"I don't need proof, Louie. Please—"

"I am glad I lugged this Nazi P-38 over with me, Alvin," Louie says. "Let's go."

I do, as you have to humor citizens at times. This was one time, I was quite sure. "I'm with you, pal," I says. "In times like these, I should give you understandin' and help in every way. Where are we goin' if I may ask?"

"At the moment I have no idea," Louie says. "It is where this Latin lollipop decides to go. It is amazin' how much comes out of bein' in a war, Alvin."

"I am afraid so," I gulp, and follow Louie Garfunkle out into the street. He hurries back toward the old brownstone ghost playground and pulls me into the doorway of a house across the street.

"I hope she is still there," Louie says. "We will wait and see, Alvin."

"This is fantastic," I says.

"That is an understatement," Louie snaps.

We wait about twenty minutes. This Miss Mafia comes prancing out of the brownstone and heads south. Me and Louie shadow the doll. Not three blocks away she enters a very ordinary-looking apartment house.

"Why, she lives quite near the murder scene," I says.

"Alvin," Louie says a little impatiently. "If you was a wolf and was casin' a sheep pen in Wyomin', would you sleep in a den in Idaho?"

"It would be quite illogical," I admit.

We go into the apartment and check on the names on the mailboxes. It says on one, *Maria Mafia*.

“It occurs to me just now,” I says. “Wasn’t there a very bloodthirsty organization in Sicily called the Mafia, Louie?”

“Bright boy,” Louie says and leads me upstairs. We pause in front of a door and press our ears against it.

We hear voices. A plaintive one argues, “I won’t never get that eye right, Madam. The paint’ll look too new if I could. Whoever painted—”

“Look, you punk,” a feminine voice says, “I promised you a thousand bucks to get that right eye on that old crow painted back on. I looked everywhere for the chip of stuff that fell off that old canvas, but—”

“Madam, only one man ever lived who could paint as nasty a lookin’ eye as the one I’m copyin’. He’s been dead a few hundred years. I’m doin’ my best. I figure mixin’ blue an’ green an’ a little yel-

“All right,” the plaintive voice says, “I’ll do my best, but you won’t never get away with it. The fresh paint ain’t cracked like—”

“We will worry about that, Buster,” the doll says. “Pour me another hooker, Cherub.”

“Comin’ up, M’dam.”

“There is at least two gorillas in there, Alvin,” Louie whispers. “They will liquidate that guy even if he does a good job. Huh, what is two cheap mugs when I been up against a dozen Nazis while armed with only a nailfile, huh?”

“What about me?” I ask.

“I’m movin’ up, Alvin,” Louie says. “You be the rear echelon.”

“If that means far behind, you can count on me,” I says.

LOUIE goes across the hall and gets a good start. He throws a shoulder as big as ham against the door and it gives. “Put ‘em up!” Louie yelps. “I got you cov—”



low an’ that eye—oh, I can’t ever do it. Let me out an’—”

“Do as the babe says, Mickey Angelo,” a very rough male voice says, “or we will make you eat what is in every tube you got there. You finish the job quick or you’ll be as dead as the gee who painted that ol’ pitcher, see? Imagine it, two hundred grand for that pitcher!”

Well, it might have happened to anybody. Just as Louie marks the order, the doll reaches for a shiv that she keeps in her stocking. I never will blame Louie for getting distracted. While he gapes at a very shapely gam, the rough boys begin the attack.

A bullet washes a Hershey bar off Louie’s sleeve. Another slug goes right

through my coat pocket and makes a mess out of a pack of butts. The broad makes a spirited attempt to perform an autopsy on me with the shiv, but the artist brings a palette down over her noggin and completes a masterpiece of first degree assault.

Louie has recovered and begins to demonstrate the art of Judo. One of the gorillas goes out through a window and lands on a fire escape.

The third dishonest citizen proves very hard to handle. I am sure he served as a bouncer in every low dive from Naples to Marseilles. He can box without using his hands which fools Louie. Louie catches the toe of a boot on the point of his chin and is disappearing behind a davenport just as the rough boy charges me.

"Help!" I howl at the painter, but he has fainted. The dame has picked up her marbles, but is throwing something much more effective at me. It is two bottles, one full and one empty. The empty one misses me by the width of a butterfly's wing. The full one slips out of the doll's hand, hits the ceiling, and comes down on the gorilla's pate. The case-hardened gee lets loose a tired sigh and collapses like a punctured football.

Louie climbs over the back of the davenport. "Alvin, you knocked the gorilla as cold as a Russian steppe in January," he exclaims. "Boy, I got to shake hands with you. Imagine it, you did it yourself!"

"Oh, it wa'n't nothin'," I says. "Let's be sure these crooks are manacled, huh? Grab the paintin', Louie. You still have the flake of old paint come off, huh? We'll give the old bag back her right headlight!"

"I can't git over it, Alvin," Louie says and pauses to take an inventory of his teeth with a forefinger. "I never forget that pitcher Doozie gimme. An' them earrings the chick wears. Little gold lizards or somethin' they look like. Or could they be baby armadillers? You never know what you git on a blind date, huh? Nobody ever had one he saw less of until recently, Alvin."

"Let's call some more cops," I says, as I notice the babe is beginning to stir. "I would not be surprised if characters like these were mined. I will take no more chances with them."

When the doll is rational once more we tell her she might as well confess. The knife was in her stocking and all.

"I went there an' stole the paintin'," she snaps. "But it was the Cherub who knifed the old goat. I can prove it by showing you flatfeet where he ditched the shiv!" Then she lapses into Italian which I do not understand, but which Louie does. "She is cussing us out something wicked, Alvin," he says.

When we get to the precinct house, we meet Hambone Noonan coming out of the cell room. Noonan is rubbing the palms of his hands together and is grinning like a hyena in front of a slaughterhouse.

"Well, I'll make Chitney confess officially in the mornin'," he says. "Where you dopes been? Who is them people you got han'cuffed? I s'pose you two came upon a family street scuffle—"

"It is only the robbers who took the paintin', Hambone," Louie says. "This Cherub here is the one that swung the shiv that shunted Quirk into the shadows. He told it all to a stenog we roused out of bed. We have the rubout weapon all wrapped up in this hanky of mine, Noonan."

"I don't see why things happen to me like they do," Hambone chokes out. "Why would Chitney confess he did it after you an' Alvin left, if he didn't do it, Louie?"

"Huh, that is simple, even if it is unbelievable," Louie Garfinkle says. "He figured maybe Lucretia did it. He wished to save her as he was in love with her."

"Wha-a-t? Nothin' like that could happen, Louie," Noonan yelps. "Oh, but it could—just to me. A love match like that could happen once in ten centuries, just to spite me. I ought to just give up."

I sigh deeply as Hambone Noonan drops his thick noggin into his hands and stares at the floor like a citizen outside a maternity ward. "When do you leave for Camp Dix?" I ask.

"Tomorrer. But I'll be back very soon, Alvin. I have a hundred and six points."

I know I shouldn't feel like I do, but I find myself wishing Louie Garfinkle had only about seven points and was scheduled for the army of occupation in Japan. It is just that I do not feel sure of much future.

X-Ray Justice

By E. C. Marshall

When Dr. Fells failed to give his criminal patient the treatment he deserved, a relentless fate did.



THE receptionist looked up and across the large waiting room at the man slumped in a well-worn, leather-covered chair. She raised a manicured

finger to attract his attention.

"You're the last patient, Mr. Strom. Dr. Fells will see you now."

Wulf Strom looked at her with dull feverish eyes, as she rapidly put her secretarial supplies away, applied lipstick, and made ready to go. She was standing up and walking toward the outside door of the office even before he had risen.

He did not look at her. As he slowly rose, waves of pain and staggering weakness momentarily blurred everything from his mind. Then he recovered, chuckling grimly. The blonde doll would not have left so blithely had she known that the "last patient" was a man escaped from the state prison, with a bullet in his shoulder.

Strom pushed his right hand into the outside pocket of his overcoat and grasped the gun that lay there firmly. He was already three-quarters of the way across the room. Before him lay the objective of his desires: a lighted room with a man in it, usually seated behind a desk, scribbling notes on a pad, probably already impatient because he had taken too long to enter the office.

He kicked open the door carelessly and waited an instant in the darkness without. Yes, the doctor was at his desk. It was Fells, all right, a little grayer, a little plumper, a little more nervous. It was as he expected. The noise of the door crashing back sent the doctor leaping into the air. When he'd settled, jolted out of his customary complacency, Wulf Strom was in the room, with the door slamming behind him.

Fells did not recognize him at once.

His fat lips pursed with sudden anger as the darkly clad figure strode across the room, thrust a chair before the desk and sat down. Fells recognized the pointed gun first. Then his mouth fell away as Strom removed his hat and laid it down wearily atop a stack of medical journals. The intruder sneered at Fells, indicated the stack.

"Still playing at being a doctor, eh Fells? Nothing like the deskside manner to the frightened patient." He glanced about the room. "Still the same," he continued in a harsh voice. "Well-filled bookcases, the neatly framed diplomas on the wall. 'From the University of Vienna,' 'From the University of Paris.' Sounds good, doesn't it? Solid, respectable, with just the faintest touch of the rollicking man of the world." He paused.

Fells licked his dry lips, glancing with lightning stabs about the room.

"You escaped—from the prison?" he asked, trembling.

Strom nodded. He put the gun back in his pocket, lit one of Fells' cigarettes which lay in an open box on the desk.

"It was difficult. It had to be planned. Would it surprise you to know that I began planning my escape just four days ago?"

Fells' eyes lost their frightened look. This was something he could understand. No witchcraft, no gibbering insanity. Just stark purpose. He even managed a smile. "You read about our marriage?"

The head across the desk from him nodded slowly.

"It was easy to take your betrayal, easy to accept five years in prison for a crime we both committed. Even if you still were outside." Strom's face darkened. "Even if your word had sent me to prison. I could rationalize that away. Law of self-preservation, anything. I might have acted the same way. But you were going to keep everything as it was—our office, our practice, our money. And you were going

to let Marjorie alone. You promised. It was your last word. She loved me."

FELLS sat back, puffing. He looked up at Strom apologetically. "My heart. It's worse since you've been gone." Then, he recovered more of his aplomb, reached deliberately for a cigarette.

"Yes, I promised, for Marjorie loved you. Note how I emphasize the past tense. But can I help the workings of a woman's heart? You knew I loved her too. And when she realized that you yourself had begun this business..."

The gun suddenly reappeared, its muzzle pointing straight at Fells' heart.

"I began it!" Strom shook with rage for an instant, then abruptly quieted. "No, that's just what you want, my dear doctor. To excite me so that I will forget my purpose—the purpose for which I risked my life. It was you who helped her mind to change. Don't lie! Lying will do you no good. You're going to die anyway."

Strom paused, letting this sink in. Then he ground out his cigarette. "Where is she now?"

Fells' teeth were chattering. "Out," he managed to gasp. "Out for a few hours to some friend's house. She'll be back."

"When?"

The other looked at the wall clock. "Not very long. Maybe an hour. Maybe two."

Strom's face brightened. He knew Marjorie's habits, knew that she never left a gathering until late. When she came back, she'd get the same treatment as he planned giving Fells.

Abruptly he rose, stripped off his overcoat, jacket, vest, revealing a blood-stained shirt. This he removed swiftly, the while keeping Fells covered with the gun. As the shirt came away, he stepped back.

"You're going to operate, doctor," snarled Strom. "They winged me in the shoulder. Hit me right between the clavicle and the top tendons—and the bullet didn't come out." He expertly removed the crude bandage covering the wound. Fells again gasped.

"My heart. Strom, you'll not ask an old friend to..."

"You'll do it scientifically, doctor and I'll watch you. First cross-sectional X-rays, then local anesthesia, then the extraction of the bullet. Finally an injection of penicillin with beeswax to insure healing of the wound."

"Strom! I warn you!" Fells stepped from behind the desk, tottered forward. "If you die..."

"That would make you very happy, doctor, wouldn't it?" barked Strom. "Now get to work. We're alone in this house. You haven't a gun or any weapon handy, have you? Always were afraid of firearms. Now we'll just lock the surgery temporarily." He stepped to the surgery door, kicked it shut, locked it, then pointed to the inclosed X-ray room.

Suddenly his voice purred, "You will follow my direction, doctor. There will be no mistakes. There had better not be. Now, set the controls for the X-ray. I'll load the plate myself."

He stepped with the surety born of long medical practice to the closet where blank X-ray plates were stored, drew out two, one large, one small. Moving to the glass-walled cubicle that held the X-ray machine behind thick, leaded, sound-proofed walls, he opened its door with the hand that held the gun, hiked the plate under the top bed of the machine's steel and stone table. As he came out again, the transformers were already humming, Fells adjusting their giant thrust of power with expert, if trembling hands.

Strom observed him with interest. "Beautiful machine," he remarked appreciatively. "Better than the one we had before." His voice dropped, and for an instant took on a dreamlike quality.

Then he shook himself, grimaced with pain, raised the gun.

"I shall enter the room, lie down on the table, and you shall take the X-ray. No tricks!" he warned as Fells crossed the room to the switches. "Remember I can keep my eyes on you even while you're out here. One false move and you get a bullet between the eyes."

Fells nodded dumbly, as Strom reentered the machine's quarters, closing the door behind him through sheer unforgetten habit.

WITHIN, Strom lay flat on the table, watched the projecting plate come rapidly down toward his shoulder as Fells made the necessary adjustments from outside. For an instant he was lost in admiration of the layout. It was caution carried to its greatest extent. There was no possibility of the dangerous rays leaking out, no necessity for the operator to hide behind plates of leaded glass and

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Murder in Miniature

By Paul Dennis O'Connor



Nelson Merrick's fiancée was a girl in a weird doll shop whose customers were strictly Sing Sing. And when one of them got bumped off by a doll's dagger, Nelson had to buy in on a man-sized struggle to save his girl from the horror of the homicidal puppets.

"SO THIS is where you work!" Nelson Merrick observed, gazing around the little shop. "Well when you consider the usual junkstores down here in this artists' colony, it's different, at least."

Its display window bore Old English script, in gold, Martin Clayfas, Unusual Dolls. It was draped in black velvet and exhibited—under a tall glass bell—one lone doll who was possibly Marie Antoinette or the Empress Eugenie, Nelson didn't know or care which.

The only doll who interested him was Geraldine Jordan. She was Martin's little blonde saleslady and very much in place—though a trifle large—against a background of glass-doored cabinets containing antique dolls. Period pieces, all of them, resembling historical personages down to the last eyelash and wrinkle, to the last tiny button and infinitesimal stitch in their costumes. They suggested, gruesomely, the shrunken human heads of the Jivaros—for they were less like dolls than actual people magically reduced to heights of twelve and eighteen inches.

Nelson didn't like their glittering, starting eyes, their positively human-looking skin. Old Martin Clayfus was a master artisan, but his work was more like taxidermy than creative art.

"Don't you like it here?" Geraldine asked.

"Frankly, no. Gives me the wim-wams! All this stuff must cost a pretty penny to produce. Clayfus pays you forty a week, and there's no sign of a roaring business. Know what I think?" Nelson didn't wait to be asked. "This place reminds me of the marijuana joints up in Harlem—a non-profit store set up for a front and shady business in the back room."

Geraldine's eyes glittered just like those of Clayfus's dolls. "Now, is that a nice thing to say! There's no shady business going on. I'm here all the time and I'd know!" She patted a Mahatma Ghandi doll which was seated cross-legged on the counter. "Anyway, I thought you came here to take me out to lunch and not to criticize."

Nelson brightened. "Yeah, sure I did. Get your hat and coat, and let's go!"

She shook her pretty head. "Can't. Martin's uptown making a delivery. I have to wait 'til he comes back." She touched Mahatma Ghandi's backbone and the doll's head wagged to and fro, while a hidden reed piped an Indian wail. It looked as if Mahatma were whistling.

Nelson lit a cigarette. "Oh, so you actually do sell stuff here!"

She pouted adorably. "I'll have you know, we sell mostly to people on Park Avenue! Our clients are all the best! Why, there's Mrs. Vanderlip—you know, the heiress to the dime-store king—and Miss Stockton who finances the ballet."

THE door opened. If the woman who walked in was from Park Avenue, then Nelson was King Solomon in all his glory. She was strictly gashouse.

Not bad-looking, though. You certainly could see plenty of her. Screaming red hair over a mask-rigid face, a black sheath of skinner's satin for a dress, several two-carat diamonds and a large hunk of Arctic Fox.

She looked Nelson up and down, then she asked Geraldine, "Is the Napoleon doll ready yet, honey?"

"Not quite," Geraldine answered with a professional smile and lilt new to Nelson. "Mr. Clayfus had to go out on a delivery. He had to stop work on Napoleon. But he'll be back soon, Miss Jacques, if you'd care to wait—"

"Haven't the time," the redhead replied, still eying Nelson. "Got an appointment at the beauty parlor." Her gaze swerved to Geraldine, and her mask assumed a new expression. Her mouth dropped open as though Geraldine had suddenly turned bright blue. "Those flowers you're wearing—where did you get them?"

Nelson wondered why Geraldine jumped. He'd noticed the little corsage on the girl's shoulder, but thought it was the one he'd given her last night. Now he saw that it wasn't. He'd given her two gardenias. This little posy consisted of a white camellia and a white carnation.

Miss Jacques bit off each word with a decisive snap of her teeth. "Only one man in all New York gives carnations with camellias—Elmo Monfrede!" Her face grew redder and redder as if holding a contest with her gaudy hair. "Why should Elmo give you flowers, may I ask?"

Geraldine flinched from Nelson's raised eyebrow, her finger shaking over the corsage. "Why—er—I suppose he just was trying to be pleasant—" she murmured, with about as much conviction as a little boy caught stealing jam. "After all, he comes here often, and—well, I try to be pleasant—"

Nelson said, dryly, "Take them off, Gerry. You're my girl, remember."

Miss Jacques drawled thinly, "Seems to me, you must be mighty pleasant to my Elmo. Don't forget, dearie, he's my Elmo, all mine." Her cold eyes swept back to Nelson thoughtfully. "I think maybe my Elmo is going to have a little talk with me. He'd better have a good

explanation. Sending flowers behind my back!" Her eyes dwindled to ugly slits. "Why, I'll kill the two-timing—!"

Nelson said, "I'll save you the trouble, Miss Jacques. I've heard of your dear Mr. Monfrede. Released from Sing Sing recently, wasn't he?"

He turned to Gerry. "Better watch out whom you associate with, precious. Convicts!" He laughed curtly. "I thought only Park Avenue people came here?"

Miss Jacques took the query as an insult. "Don't you go making snide remarks about me!" She took a quick step forward, swinging up a hand. It smacked sharply on Nelson's left cheek. He staggered backward against the counter, disturbing Mahatma Ghandi, who began to pipe again.

Miss Jacques yanked her white fur on her shoulders as if it had been trying to sneak back to its den, looked down her nose at Nelson, and sprinted outside, slamming the door so vigorously that—though the pane didn't smash—the velvet draperies swung in the draft.

Geraldine shut off Ghandi's whistle, laid her arms on the counter, put her face on them, and started to cry. At which point the door opened again and Martin Clayfus entered. He was a wisp of a man with spectacles see-sawing on the end of his nose, and a large grey mustache which curled over his upper lip, hiding it.

Clayfus lifted both hands in dismay. "Miss Jordan—crying!" He disregarded Nelson entirely. "Ah, you poor child. Hungry, no doubt, and with a headache." He hurried around the counter to her and patted her heaving shoulders. "There, there, my dear. You hurry right off and have your little something to eat!"

Geraldine straightened up, searching for her handkerchief. She cast a sheepish, reproachful look at Nelson as she honked her nose. Clayfus brought the girl her hat and coat.

"Here, my dear, you just run right out." He helped her into her coat. "And I'll tell you what!" His voice lifted with the delight of pure inspiration. "You just take the afternoon off!"

"But—but you'll need me—" Gerry murmured weakly, with a sullen look toward her fiancé.

"Nonsense! I have just a little work to do on Mr. Napoleon, and that's all. Run along, child, with your nice young

man!" He made Nelson sound like a piece of cake.

Geraldine succumbed to the doll-maker's blandishments and left the establishment, but her sidelong glances at Nelson didn't mollify him. He was mad clear through. "Wearin' another man's flowers!" he snorted. "If it comes to the point of you having to accept stuff from a no-good like Elmo Monfrede just to keep Clayfus and his business from going haywire, you'd better quit your job!"

"I don't tell you how to run your life!" Gerry snapped. "Maybe it's a good thing I'm learning all about you, now, before we're married and it's too late. Oh, I hate you—hate you! Here, take back your ring. I won't have lunch with you—and I won't see you tonight, or ever again!"

"Damn it, Monfrede must have made a big impression on you for you to turn independent all of a sudden! I'll fix that! I'll fix him! When I get through with him, you won't be getting any more flowers from him! You'll be sending them care of the cemetery!"

JUST a lover's quarrel, which should have blown over by nightfall. It might have, if Nelson hadn't found Gerry's ring in his pocket at closing time in his office. He became enraged all over again. No date with Gerry tonight. Her ring here instead of on her finger where it belonged. Flowers from Elmo Monfrede . . .

Instead of eating, he went to a drug store and found Monfrede's number in the telephone book. He didn't telephone Monfrede. You can't blacken a guy's eyes over a wire. He hopped a cab and went to East Twenty-seventh and Lexington Avenue. Monfrede's number was the corner building—two stories above a drug store.

Nelson paid the hackie and started toward the building. A redheaded fellow emerged and hurried toward a long green car parked halfway down the block. "You Monfrede?" Nelson called to him. The fellow looked back, but kept on going. Nelson shrugged. It might have been Miss Jacques' boy friend, at that. With Nelson's luck, that's probably who it was.

The redheaded fellow zipped into the green car as if attached to it by a spring, and it rolled away in a good deal of hurry. Nelson climbed the dark hall's stair and hesitated at the door on the landing. It was a two-floor apartment,

apparently. He pushed the bell-button, heard the bell growl like a metal cur, and waited. No answer. He knocked, and the door creaked inward from his knuckles. The room beyond was dark.

Nelson stepped in. The fellow with the green car had probably been Monfrede, at that. Well, Nelson would find a cozy chair, make himself comfortable, and wait. He fumbled along the wall for the light switch and tripped over something soft and yielding. He found the light, clicked it on, and saw that what had tripped him was a body.

This was Elmo, all right. The corpse was much more Miss Jacques' type. As hard-faced as she, even with his mouth sagging open. Dressed in a grey zoot-suit with a red chalk stripe. Sprawled as though an idiot giant had pulled his arms and legs out of their sockets, like maiming a fly, then flung the body down and stamped on it—the grotesque distortion of death.

Another body lay beside him, a tiny one. A doll's. Napoleon Bonaparte lay broken and twisted. Only his mouth wasn't gaping and his eyes rolled up to the whites. Even in miniature death, Napoleon retained his dignity.

What had killed Elmo?

A bright sliver protruded from his throat just below the ear. A shining splinter with a hilt and finger-guard.

Napoleon's little four-inch sword! It had been thrust into Elmo's throat and viciously twirled, severing the nerve paths, paralyzing the man's involuntary muscles, strangling him almost instantly.

"Oops!" Nelson gurgled, and turned, about to make a hasty exit. But someone was at the door—Gerry Jordan. Her face was paint-white, her lipstick shocking red, one hand raised in horror to her mouth.

Slowly she raised her eyes from the body to Nelson, let them settle down to the body again.

"Nelson! You didn't—you couldn't?" Her voice was mechanical, inhuman.

"Of course I didn't!" He touched the cadaver's cheek. "Elmo's been dead for hours. He's cold."

"But what are you doing here?" She couldn't turn from the corpse. It was attractive to her as a snake's eyes to a bird.

"I came to tell him off. What are you doing here yourself?"

At last she looked up, a trace of color

warming the white. "I was afraid maybe you'd come here. I wanted to warn him—"

He stepped over to her, grasped her arm. "So you cared about him, did you?"

She struggled a little, but ineffectually. "No, no. You don't understand. I just didn't want you to get in trouble over me, that's all!" Then, being in love, they forgot for a moment that there was any such thing as death, for it was their reconciliation.

"Pretty picture!" jeered the redheaded Miss Jacques from the hall. "Love in bloom! Step aside and let me talk to—" She jerked as if beaten. "Elmo!"

She thrust them aside as if they were weeds and dropped to her knees by the body. But almost in the same second she was on her feet again, whipping a gun from her purse and covering the two with it. "Talk, and talk fast! Who did it?"

Gerry cried, "Neither of us—" just as Nelson said, "We just got here!"

Mis Jacques approached them. "I just got here, too. Come on, speak up, one of you, or I'll let you both have it!"

"OH, DEAR, dear—oh, deary me!" murmured a fourth voice from the door. It was Martin Clayfus with a large parcel in brown paper. "Why, Jenny—Miss Jacques—what are you doing?"

He saw the body, and dropped his package. It contained glass and made a dreadful crash.

Jenny Jacques pointed with a taut perk of her head. "Get alongside them!" Her gun was covering all three. "What're you doing here, toy-maker?"

"When Mr. Monfrede called for the Napoleon doll this afternoon, he forgot the pedestal and glass dome," Clayfus said, making *ts* sounds with his tongue. "And to think he was alive only a few hours ago!"

Suddenly he gasped and screwed up his face like a little boy on the brink of tears. "My Napoleon! Broken!" He would have reached for the doll, but Jenny Jacques backed him to the others with a wave of her weapon. "Oh, who did it? Who did it?"

"That's what I want to know," Jenny said curtly. "All of you get farther in the room—and keep your hands up. I loved Elmo. I'd just as soon kill you all, the way I feel right now."

"We just got here," Nelson said. "He's

been cold for a long time. Feel him if you don't believe me!"

Jenny wasn't crosseyed, but she gave the impression. She was able to hold them at bay and still look at Elmo's face as she bent to touch it. Her brows ran together in a scowl as she snatched at his hair. "A bead!" But it wouldn't come loose at her first touch. It was threaded in Elmo's hair. She held it up, rolling it between her fingers. "A bisque bead. Who put it in his hair, and why?"

"Please put the gun away," Clayfus quavered. "You make me nervous!"

Nelson remembered. "Just as I was coming in, a redheaded fellow came out and hotfooted it to a big green car," he said. "But he couldn't have done it—unless he hung around for hours afterwards—"

"Ward Taylor!" Jenny Jacques said thoughtfully. "Yeah, maybe. The broken doll—he wanted what was inside of—" She stopped, gulping back the rest of her words. "It's a lie!"

Nelson shook his head.

"We ought to call the police," Gerry suggested.

Jenny looked a snarl at her. "We're callin' nobody. Not 'til I get to the bottom of this! Whoever's done it is goin' to get his, before any cops can stop me! All right, you three. We'll take a run to Ward Taylor's and have a little talk with him. If he's got an alibi, it'll be just too bad for one of you, the one who can't prove he didn't do it!"

Her hands were shaking alarmingly. It made even herself nervous. She lowered the gun for an instant and just in time. Her jittering fingers squeezed the trigger and it hopped in her hand, spitting flame and smoke, like a live little demon.

Inadvertently Gerry clutched Nelson from one side and Clayfus from the other, steadying him as his knees buckled. Jenny seemed satisfied, oddly enough. "Just a hint of what you got comin'—one of you," she said.

"Listen, Miss Jacques," Clayfus babbled eagerly. "Why, I've been in the shop all afternoon! Mr. Monfrede called for his doll at five-thirty, and I didn't leave until twenty minutes ago. You can verify that with a customer who called me to place an order, just as I was leaving to bring the glass dome and pedestal here."

He gestured excitedly. "Yes, and people must have seen Mr. Monfrede leaving

my place. They'd have noticed his scar and his funny—I mean, his distinctive—suit. Yes, and I took a taxi—you can check up—" He hung on Nelson as if afraid he'd sink through the floor. "Please put that awful gun away, Miss Jacques! I'm an old man, and my poor heart—"

Jenny considered, for just a fraction of an instant. She jerked her gun in a gesture. "Okay, grandpa. You're out of it, because I know where I can get you if I want you, and you wouldn't bump off a rich customer. You can beat it."

Her weapon returned to Nelson and the girl. "You two had good motives, I'm thinkin'. You'll come along with me. Beat it, pop!"

Clayfus hesitated, glancing around as if he thought he'd forgotten something. Then, with the lightest of whimpers, he scuttled to the door and scurried down to the street with almost youthful agility.

"Going for the cops," Jenny observed with a cobra's smile. "But they won't get here until we're gone. You two start out. Remember, I'm right behind you!"

"My car's at the door," she said, as they reached the sidewalk. "Get into it, and no funny business. I'm apprehendin' a murderer, in case I have to shoot." There was only one pedestrian, far down the block. He didn't seem to sense anything wrong as Jenny Jacques maneuvered the pair into her sedan.

"You drive," she told Nelson from the back seat. "I've got a bead on the both of you!"

THE address was up in the West Seventies. While on their way, Nelson tried to explain his movements of the afternoon, then realized that if he cleared himself he would only put Gerry that much deeper in the hole.

As they stopped before Taylor's house, parking behind the long green car, Jenny warned, "Go straight up the steps into the vestibule. I'm watchin' you, see?"

Taylor's housekeeper opened the door. "Mr. Taylor isn't at home," she protested firmly.

"Oh, yeah?" Jenny displayed her gun. "Where his car goes, he goes. Get back in there and call him—and stay away from that telephone!"

Taylor's room was the first door down the hall—double doors to be exact. He had the front room, what had been the

drawing room when the house had been a private residence. He slid them open and peeped out with a reproachful glance at the housekeeper, who shrugged helplessly.

"In," Jenny told Nelson and Gerry, poking each of them in the back with the gun. "You, too, you old bat!" she added to the housekeeper.

While Taylor lit a cigarette with trembling fingers, Jenny said flatly, "This guy saw you lamming out of Elmo's a little while ago. Anything to say to that?"

Taylor seemed about to make a denial. He stamped out his cigarette before he had taken a good puff on it, and opened his mouth. Jenny lied, "I saw you too. Well?"

"Well—yes, Jenny. I was there. Somebody killed Elmo. I found him on the floor, and I—well, I got scared and beat it."

"You didn't maybe bust the doll after you stabbed him? You weren't maybe looking for the beads, were you?"

Taylor took another cigarette out of his pack. He had to scratch the match three times before it flared into flame. "So you know about the beads?"

"I know lots you mightn't think I know."

Taylor glanced at Nelson and Gerry with a crease of worry between his brows. "Naturally, when I'm supposed to get twenty four-carat alexandrites, and the mailman drops me twenty low-grade amethysts—" he said. "Naturally I wanted to see why. But I give you my word, I didn't kill Elmo. No amount of alexandrites are worth that much trouble."

He took a chance on a neat bit of psychology. The only light came from the lamp beside him. He still held the burning match. He dropped it. As everyone's eyes instinctively followed its flame—subconsciously aware of the danger of fire—he swept out an arm, smashing the light against the wall, and leaping aside. Jenny's gun spat at him, but missed. A second blow shattered the bulb. There was only darkness, Gerry's frightened cry, then Jenny's voice:

"Stand still, blast you!" Her gun crashed again, with a red lightning effect.

Nelson scooped Gerry close and backed along the wall. There was the sound of scuffling, a choking wail from the housekeeper as she raced into the feebly illuminated hall toward the telephone. Jenny's

gun roared again with the lightning effect. But by that time Nelson had pulled Gerry out into the hall.

He threw open the door and they scrambled outside, running hand in hand half a block until they found a convenient doorway.

Gerry sobbed against Nelson's lapels until she got her breath back. "Now what?" she asked.

"We'll catch a cop, if we can, and go back to Taylor's," Nelson said.

BUT when they had secured Officers Blair and Duffy in a squad car, they found only Taylor's tearful housekeeper at his rooms. The green car was gone.

"The redheaded lady made him go somewhere with her," the housekeeper sniffled.

"Probably Monfrede's," Nelson hazarded.

"Come along, you're witnesses," Officer Duffy remarked. Gerry had to sit on Nelson's lap, but he hadn't any objections. As they drove down to Twenty-seventh Street, Nelson explained the situation. The green car was in front of Monfrede's apartment.

Duffy said, "Blair, stay by this green car, in case they try sneaking out the back way. You two—" He wasn't sure what to do with Nelson and Gerry. Finally he said, "You come up with me."

"She'll shoot us!" Gerry worried, but Duffy smiled genially and patted his holster. "Nobody shoots at a cop if he's wise!"

There was an argument going on in Monfrede's apartment. Taylor protesting, Jenny insisting. Taylor cried, "Jenny, I tell you that other guy did it! Even if Elmo did cross me up and send me amethysts, he was my partner—"

And Jenny, "Yeah, but where you going to find him now, wise guy?"

"He's with the girl. She works at the toy shop, you said. The old man who makes dolls will know where she is?"

Duffy pushed on the bell. As it growled stridently, the room beyond became silent. Then Duffy banged with a hard fist. "Open up in there!"

The sound of hasty murmurs coming faintly from within. Duffy thumped his clenched hand again. "Open up before I bust down the door!"

Silence. But Duffy didn't smash the door with his shoulder. He shot off the



lock, kicked the door open, and gingerly peered around the framework into darkness. "Come on out afore I blast y' out!" But no answer. He ventured alone inside, found the light. The body was there. They'd tried to hide it, but too hastily.

Then Officer Blair raced up the stair, his gun preceding him as if dragging him pell-mell after it. And the frantic thrum, thrum of a motor starting down in the street.

"I told you to stick by their car!" Duffy roared to Blair. "Now they're gettin' away!" He pushed Blair, Nelson, and Gerry to one side and rushed down the steps.

Blair, following him in as much of a hurry, beckoned Nelson and Gerry. "I heard shootin'. I had to come," he panted, though Duffy couldn't hear him.

When they reached the walk, the green car had turned the corner. A few passers-by were frozen along the walk, staring. Duffy popped into the squad car, and Blair pushed Nelson and Gerry in after him. They started with such a rush that the door didn't slam until they were almost into the next street.

The green car didn't bother any more about red lights than the squad car. It zigzagged through the westbound traffic, did a neat turn uptown at Broad-

way, and forced one car to sideswipe another in self-defense, which caused a traffic jam. By the time the squad car had by-passed the tangle of vehicles, the green car was out of sight but good.

"I don't believe they're going uptown at all," Gerry said. "That Miss Jacques said they'd go to Mr. Clayfus's, didn't she? They want to learn where I live, so they can get at you, Nelson! I'm sure they'll swerve around and go to the doll shop."

"And where's this doll shop?" Blair asked.

"Down on Greenwich Avenue, between Sixth and Seventh," Nelson said. And so—presently—they found themselves at the Clayfus establishment.

"Why, the light's still burning," Gerry exclaimed, as they walked up to the front door. She nodded at a crack of light between the velvet curtains.

"Open the door," Duffy murmured. Blair was watching the street. Gerry made use of her key. They filed in, Duffy leading, his gun in readiness, but it was only old Clayfus who was in the back room.

HE WAS sitting at a long table, sewing a brocaded skirt to a little medieval doll. Around him and beside him were

plain unpainted shelves with dolls standing and sitting like a fascinated audience in a theater. Clayfus looked up.

"Policemen! Oh, my! Ah, Miss Geraldine, my child, you're not in any danger, then. I was worried. And your young man—"

"Look, Clayfus," Nelson said, "if you were so worried about Miss Geraldine, you might have sent the police to her rescue."

"Oh, but I did!" Clayfus nodded at Blair and Duffy.

"We picked these up, ourselves!" Nelson said.

"Then you must have left right after I," the doll-maker answered. "I telephoned at once!"

Duffy said, "You'd better pack that there doll away and hide behind something. We're expectin' visitors. From what this man says"—meaning Nelson—"they have guns."

"Oh, dear me, no!" Clayfus wrinkled his forehead. "But I must finish Lucrezia here. It's a rush order." He smiled. "If I'm working as I should be, whoever it is won't think anything's wrong, and won't try to make trouble."

"Lucrezia?" Blair asked.

"Lucrezia Borgia," Gerry explained. "This doll is a replica of the famous poisoner who lived back in old Italy in the fifteen or sixteen hundreds."

"Fourteen hundreds," corrected Nelson.

Blair said, "Okay, pop, have it your way." He pointed a thumb to the curtained storeroom. "Get in there, you two."

They squeezed in a narrow space, boxes on one side, and the partition wall on the other. Duffy entered last, just as the front door rattled with knocking. He pointed his gun through the curtain's coarse web.

"Sister, you had an all-right hunch," he murmured to Gerry as old Clayfus arose and shuffled to answer the summons.

Gerry huddled so close to Nelson at the sound of Jenny's voice that she tipped him off-balance. He reeled against a barrel of waste paper and scraps, his hand falling on a tiny set of fingers. He lifted them—a broken doll's arm, as Jenny and Taylor entered the back room and Jenny said:

"Clayfus, what's the name of the girl who works here?"

But old Clayfus didn't answer. Then Taylor snapped, "Better tell us, if you want to keep healthy!"

Whereat Duffy said, "All right, put 'em up!" and barged out from behind the curtain. He caught Taylor and Jenny by surprise. Neither had taken out guns as yet.

Blair emerged on Duffy's heels. Nelson dropped the doll's arm back among the fragments of silks, paper, bits of plaster and sawdust stuffing. He took Gerry's hand and led her to the opening.

"And now we'll have a little talk," Duffy said. "Just why do you want the girl's address?"

"Her boy friend killed my Elmo!" Jenny's eyes alighted on Nelson. "You know you did!"

Why was Taylor sidling toward one of the shelves? Nelson followed the fellow's intent gaze. Then, as neatly as suddenly, everything clicked into place.

"You needn't slap me again, Miss Jacques, even if only with words," Nelson said. "I didn't do it, but now I know who did!"

Three things happened at once. Taylor lunged to the shelf and snatched a duplicate Napoleon doll from it; old Clayfus gazed interestedly over his wobbling glasses to Nelson; and Jenny made a dive for Duffy's gun.

Blair swung at Taylor, who warded off the blow with the doll. Duffy twisted his wrist, and instead of grasping the gun, Jenny was thrown to the floor. As she scrambled up, the second Napoleon doll's fragments—Blair's blow broke it—rained around her. A flashing purple necklace rolled snakily among them. Clayfus sat calmly sewing. Let the ceiling fall, let the floor fall apart, he'd still be sewing.

Duffy's weapon was covering Jenny. She didn't care. She clawed for the necklace. With an inarticulate cry, Taylor swooped down for the jewels. Blair clipped him with his nightstick, pushed the falling man aside and tore the beads from Jenny's fingers.

The redhead scrambled up. "Tryin' to lie your way out of it!" she yelled at Nelson. Her hands curved into serviceable talons. "I'll get you before you can say anythin' much!"

"Now, now," Duffy murmured gently, seizing her by the arm and dragging her

backward. "You'll hold still, or you'll wear bracelets."

He grinned crookedly at Nelson. "What's the solution, mastermind?" On the floor, Taylor twitched, suggesting that he mightn't be as senseless as he had appeared.

"Clayfus, of course," Nelson said. The old doll-maker continued with his stitching, chuckling. "It all fits together now. Gerry was given the afternoon off, so she couldn't see what went on. Clayfus took the Napoleon doll to Elmo, killed Elmo with the toy sword which Elmo naturally wouldn't consider a killer's weapon, then made a plaster cast of Elmo's face. A drop of plaster fell in Elmo's hair. He overlooked that. It dried. When Miss Jacques found it she thought it was a bead."

CLAYFUS shook his head airily. Nelson went on, "Clayfus had reason to kill Elmo, because he addressed Miss Jacques as 'Jenny'. Implying he either knows her very well, or knows all about her from Elmo. So he had a motive. He took the plaster cast home along with one of Elmo's gaudy suits. From the mould he reconstructed Elmo's face, complete to the scar. He's a master craftsman. Look at these dolls here—he could do it. There he ostentatiously left, disguised as Elmo, and went to Elmo's place a second time, making an alibi for himself, shifting the time for the murder.

"You can check that. If any customer telephoned him at his shop, where he returned to further improve his alibi, I'll bet she did it because he had left his phone number at her place when he knew she'd be out."

Jenny didn't seem to believe a word of it. Nelson went on, "I felt this shop was a front for something else as soon as I stepped in here. Sure! Clayfus takes his dolls to swank Park Avenue people, cases their apartments, then tips off Elmo and Taylor where to pull a snatch. He let Elmo come here to buy and exchange dolls for Miss Jacques' collection, so that if Elmo was ever seen here, there'd be valid reason." Nobody seemed to notice that Taylor was gradually pulling himself up into a menacing crouch.

"And guess what's inside the dolls!" Nelson said. "Jewelry!"

Clayfus made more *tst* sounds with his tongue. "Simply fantastic!"

"When this alexandrite necklace was taken in that big jewel robbery last week, Clayfus suggested to Elmo that he, Clayfus, hold the necklace in event of police interrogation into Elmo's previous record. Then maybe Elmo decided he might be double-crossed and wanted the necklace.

"But Clayfus intended the double-cross, since the papers said the necklace is worth sixty thousand dollars. So he mailed amethyst phonies to Taylor, to make Taylor think Elmo was cheating Taylor out of his share, making Taylor the goat when Elmo would be found dead. And then he killed Elmo. That's the motive."

Clayfus asked, "And how did you find out all this?"

"When I put the doll back in the trash can in your storeroom. Bits of plaster like bisque beads. And part of a mould of a large face, a live man's face, not a doll's, and with a scar on it."

Suddenly Taylor sprang to his feet. Blair had been waiting for this, and clunked him firmly on the head again.

Clayfus said, "You've been clever, young man. But I'm clever, too. Have you ever seen this?"

"Watch with them hands!" Duffy barked, suspecting gunplay. But Clayfus merely pressed a part of Lucrezia Borgia's anatomy. One of her hands swept out and touched his, that was all.

"You'd better get up and come down to the station," Duffy said, as the doll-maker let go of Lucrezia and leaned back on his chair.

"No need," Clayfus replied, with a weary smile. "No need at all!" Then he clutched at his throat, his eyes rolling and bulging as they rolled. He coughed harshly, and tumbled face-down.

Blair shook him. Clayfus's head rolled, the spectacles dropping off. His face was like dirty dough.

"Dead," Blair said. Jenny began to cry from sheer fury.

Gerry peered at Lucrezia's hand. "The poison ring of the Borgias!" she whispered, pointing.

Duffy grunted a grim laugh. "Huh, some doll!"

Nelson pulled Gerry closer, took the engagement ring from his pocket, and slid it on her hand. She smiled.

"That's what I say," Nelson murmured. "That's what you are, Gerry, some doll!"

Hitchhike to a Hangnoose

By Richard Brister

When Joe Pender stopped to pick up that benighted hitchhiker, Joe'd been on his way to meet his fiancée. But after he'd stepped on the gas again, Joe learned his road now led only to a hangnoose rendezvous with Satan.

HE HAD no more than a fleeting glimpse of the hitchhiker, before he had passed him. His right headlight had blanked out about fifty miles back; it was dark as pitch in this desolate Louisiana swamp country. Besides, he'd been on the verge of dozing.

The monotonous whine of his tires across the macadam had half-hypnotized him. He went whipping right past. His tired eyes flicked only briefly toward the beckoning figure.

That was all. He might have ignored that mendicant thumb. But he had been driving since noon. His radio was on the fritz. He needed an ear to bend, he thought, smiling, and reflected that the Army had made an extrovert of him. He was out now, on points, but he'd learned how to ride his own thumb, as a soldier. He felt a quick sympathy for that poor devil back there, marooned at night in this bleak swamp country.

He stamped the brake pedal and pulled over onto the shoulder. Maybe he was a fool and taking his chances, but, hell, that was life as he'd learned in the Army. You never knew. The guy might just turn out to be a good Joe. They could maybe have themselves a time swapping lies with each other.

It was dark in the coupé's front seat. One panel light cast a pale glow against the threadbare cushions. It bathed the guy's face as he entered. You could make out the white of his hands, but his dark clothes were a question mark against the night's black drop curtain.



"Didn't figure you was gonna stop, pal." The voice was breathless from running. "Goin' far, are ya?"

"New Orleans. Hope to be there along toward midnight. Been drivin' since

noon. I'm from up near Atlanta. Name's Joe. Joe Pender."

"Mine's"—it seemed to Joe that the voice hesitated—"Dale. Harry Dale."

The unending macadam unwound steadily under the quivering beam of his one good headlight. He said, "Borrowed this hack from my kid brother, Phil. Got this girl in New Orleans, see? We used to go steady, when she still lived up in Georgia. That was before I got drafted. So I'm gonna see her tonight and pop the ol' question." He turned toward the shadowy bulk on the seat beside him. "You married Dale?"

"Once," the voice said. "It's okay, maybe, if you get the right dame."

"Sure, sure," Joe said. "That's what I told Pop—those words—only this mornin'. This is the right one, see? Right for me. A guy can usually tell, if he takes his time looking."

"Yeah." His guest of the road sounded bored by the topic.

Joe said, "You shoulda heard the old man cuss, when he heard I was takin' off in Phil's car all the way to New Orleans. But, hell, it's no trouble to get gas now. And the kid's got a brand new set of tires on this old heap. So—"

"All right," said his rider. "Now just quit beatin' your gums a second, while I say somethin'."

Joe felt a tight hollow sensation beneath his belt. Without turning his eyes from the road, he said, "What gives, friend?"

"Trouble. And a slug in your ear, if you don't do like I tell you. Pull over into that clearing, ahead there."

There was a peninsula of firm ground jutting off from the road where Dale indicated. Joe pulled over on it, following a pair of deep tire tracks which had not been used apparently for months.

Harry Dale—if that was his name—slid out of the door backwards, watching Joe closely. Something in his right hand glinted coldly in the diffused glow from Joe's single headlight.

"Out this side, pal." His arm jerked. "And no damn—hey, cut the—"

Joe's left elbow had gently nudged his door handle downward. He felt the spring catch release, felt the door give outward as his shoulder pressed it.

He hurled himself outward and down in a dive for safety, at the same time

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punching the headlight button. A jungle blackness descended abruptly over the little peninsula surrounded by swamp land.

The gun in Dale's hand barked viciously, jarring Joe's eardrums. He felt the whispering breath of death fan one up-flung wrist. Then he landed hard on both shoulders. He somersaulted and scrambled erect like a cat.

He blinked frantically about him. He could see nothing but the shadowy silhouettes of tall trees against dark moonless sky. So Dale couldn't see him, he thought tensely. But Joe had killed a Jap once by the light of a buddy's gun-flash. There was nothing to stop Dale from firing once to locate him, and again to kill him.

He'd have to run for it. There was, of course, the swamp to contend with, but he'd rather take his chances with lizards and quicksand than rush Dale's gun. Joe had learned his respect for bullets the hard way, from his Army teachers. He craved a foxhole right now. Failing that, he knew his best ally was distance.

He turned his back on the car and lurched forward in panic, unsure of his footing. Once he fell headlong, but continued scrambling ahead on all fours. It would not take Dale long to find that headlight button.

And then it came, the sledgehammer impact, the darting pains in his neck. He crashed headlong against some unyielding object. It was a stubby tree trunk. He felt its sides briefly with the fingers of his left hand, but was powerless to avoid it.

Pinpoints of light darted in crazy-quilt patterns before his dazed eyes. He felt a rush of blood touch his forehead with throbbing pain. Then swiftly, mercifully, consciousness left him.

GRADUALLY the inky blackness was suffused with pale light. Then a dazzling brilliance bathed him and pried his eyes open.

His head felt like an overinflated balloon, throbbing with pain as each pulse of blood reached the lump on his forehead. He saw that Dale had swung the coupé's headlight upon him. The man was standing not ten feet away, scowling down at him. Underneath Dale's brown topcoat, Joe saw the striped trousers of

a runaway convict. He cursed himself, roundly, for not having been more on his guard against him.

Dale's cropped head looked G. I. The stubble of beard on his left chin didn't, nor did the crafty, piglike eyes. He said, "Lucky for you that stump stopped you before you reached the swamp." His sardonic mouth twisted. "I'd 've killed you, sure, if you'd messed up that nice suit of clothes, pal. I need 'em."

Joe said thickly, "The next time I pick up a hitchhiker at night, I—"

"Quit beefin'. You're gonna get a chance to save your skin. I got plans for you, pal."

"Yeah?"

The small eyes glimmered. "Ever do any running, pal? Say, like cross-country?"

As a matter of fact, Joe had run the mile, during his one year at college. He said, "What's—"

"Back where you picked me up, there's a posse. They got hounds, pal. Bloodhounds and mastiffs. You know how it is with mastiffs. Them purps don't fool, if they ever catch up with the sucker they're sicked on." He grinned. "I'm changin' clothes with you, pal. I'm takin' you back where they'll pick up the scent. You're gonna give them dogs a good exercisin'."

Joe licked his dry lips. He said with logic dictated by panic, "It's nice, Dale. It's cute. Only you can't afford to waste the time it'd take to—"

"I'll be gainin' time, pal. You'll be doin' me that little favor, by runnin' them dogs on a goose chase."

"Maybe I won't run. I'll go up a tree." He fingered the bump on his head. "I'm too weak to run far, and you know it. You're making a bad play, Dale. Plantin' me back there to wise up the posse—"

"You won't wise up nobody, pal. Go up a tree and they'll gun you down from a distance. They're not takin' chances. They know I'm armed. No matter how hard you try to convince 'em you're not Harry Dale, they'll plug you the minute they throw a light on you. In my clothes you'll be it, pal. I killed a guard, see? I figure you'll give 'em a run for their money. Give me a head start, that's all I'm askin'." Now the hand that clutched the stubby pistol jerked forward. "Peel them clothes off!"

Joe stared at the gaping muzzle a

moment. He began picking away at his buttons.

When the exchange was completed, Dale grunted, "You're drivin'. And if you so much as look funny, I'll plug you. Drive back to the place where you found me."

Joe drove that way grimly. Dale sat well away from him. And he knew that ugly little pistol was pointed directly at him. Trying to beat Dale's trigger finger again would be a suicide tactic.

He could feel cold sweat touching his forearms with small probing fingers. His stomach had the tight hollow feeling he had known in the agonizing moments before battle action.

Well, Pop had told him the trip was a fool idea. If he hadn't tried to go so far in one week end, he'd not have been sleepy and tired. He'd not have needed a hitchhiker's company to stimulate him, he thought wearily. But there must be some way out of this situation. He should be thinking about that, instead of—

Perversely, his muddled mind rambled to thoughts of the car, of the heart-break its loss would cause the kid brother.

Phil was still in the high school bracket. This car was his proudest possession, and of course, an important social asset. The kid had just got over his shyness with girls, and lately the coupé had furnished a setting for some high powered woo-pitching.

Once the kid had soberly philosophized to him, "Girls are funny, Joe. There's none of 'em that don't really go for a bit of hugging. But they sure all hate to admit it. That's why I rigged up this little gimmick in the car, where the gas line runs down past the starter button."

The coupé's gas tank was installed under the cowl ahead of the windshield. Joe had traced the gas line down with his eye, until his glance stopped on Phil's gimmick. "What is it?" he had asked the kid.

"Just a valve lever. I can kick it on or off with my foot. When it's off, the engine'll run about a mile, then start coughing for more gas. If I've got a girl out, I act like it's engine trouble." He grinned. "That way, she's still got her pride, see? But you can just bet we look

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at the moon a good while, before I get out and hunt for the 'trouble'."

Pretty slick, Joe'd told him. And he told himself, now, that Phil's little gimmick was right down his alley.

AS THEY rolled to the spot where he'd picked Dale up, the convict grunted, "Brake her down, pal, This is as far as you're goin'."

And almost, Joe grinned, as far as you will, Mr. Hot Shot. His right toe slid imperceptibly forward, gently forcing Phil's gimmick into the "shut" position. One mile, Dale. Because if you're as dumb as I think you are, you'll figure she's really run dry. Then we'll both be walking. Or would it be running?

Somewhere off to the left he heard the mournful, full-throated baying of hounds. So Dale had not lied. Despite the warmth of the night, despite the extra protection of the topcoat Dale had forced upon him, Joe shivered.

He halted the car, sat hunched dejectedly over the wheel.

Dale said in a flat tone, "Kinda rough on you, bud. But I—" His voice hardened abruptly. "All right. Get out and get goin'."

Joe stepped onto the macadam, knowing the gun was still pointed at him, though it was too dark to see it. He was already slipping out of the topcoat, watching Dale slide in back of the wheel.

Dale looked at him, chuckling shortly, "Gettin' trimmed down for speed, hey? Guess you don't like the sound of them hounds any more'n I did. I figured you'd give 'em a run, when it come right down to it."

He slipped the car into gear and gunned it forward. Joe ducked low, took four plunging strides, and jumped aboard the rear bumper.

He was working like a beaver on his precarious perch there, having a tough time just hanging on, among other things, when the tires screamed beneath him. The car braked down as abruptly as if it had bumped into something, swerved in a sharp zigzag pattern, then shot swiftly forward. Joe fell to the macadam, skinning his knees.

"Figured you'd try that, pal. You seen too many movies."

Joe shook his fist at the retreating tail light. "Damn you!" he gritted.

He had already disposed of the top-

coat. He ripped off his striped jacket to give his chest and his arms more freedom of motion.

Behind him the baying of the hounds had taken on an urgent inflection, a strident blood-chilling clamor, as if the dogs knew they were closing in on their quarry.

Joe put his head down and started to run, just as Dale had predicted. He ran directly up that flat macadam roadbed, sighting on the tiny red dot of that fast disappearing tail light.

He ran effortlessly, with the graceful gait of a trained distance runner, breathing carefully between his teeth, for he knew that tonight his life might depend on the skill a canny old coach had long ago taught him.

Go up a tree and they'll gun you down from a distance. They're not takin' chances. Plug the minute they throw a light on you . . . You know how it is with mastiffs. Them purps don't fool, if they ever catch up with the sucker they're sicked on!

He could hear the dogs gaining. He had gone probably half a mile. His lungs were a cauldron of molten metal. His legs were turning to dead weight beneath him. And still the nerve-wracking clamor of dogs and men inexorably shortened that gap between them.

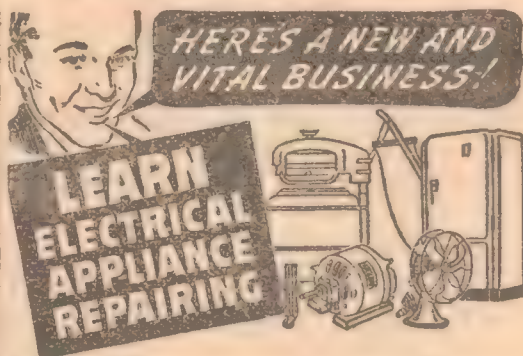
He saw the piercing beam of searchlight lance up the road behind him. The posse had crossed his trail on the road, then. He heard a hoarse, excited voice yelling, "Damn fool's high tailin' it down the macadam. Let's turn a pair of them dawgs loose, Tiny. I'm about tuckered."

Joe ran harder. After a moment, he heard the throaty voice of a pair of those hounds coming ahead of the main bunch. The dirty devils! They had turned two dogs loose!

Stark terror drove him. He had never known such a clutching dread as he felt in this moment. The dogs would rip him to shreds, inflamed by the scent of Dale's trousers on him.

Sweat rolled in great globules down his forehead, stinging his eyes. He squinted into the bleak darkness ahead. Where in the devil had the car got to? Had he failed to completely trip Phil's gimmick? Had Dale discovered the trick, reopened the gas line, and driven on, he asked himself sickly.

He had tried to envision Dale's reac-



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tion, when the car's engine conked out on him. Dale would cuss and kick the starter a while, then start making fast tracks afoot, if Joe knew anything at all about human nature.

He might, in his exasperation, even neglect to yank out the keys. Joe hoped so. If he could just overtake the stalled car before those damn dogs caught up with him, he could lock himself in and at least be safe from those blood-thirsty purps, to use Dale's word for them.

But the two lead dogs, the pair turned loose by the posse, were closing the gap behind him like lightning.

JOE squinted in panic along the dark roadbed. Ahead about fifty yards, he made out the hazy bulk of a bridge. He remembered it now, remembered zipping across it at forty just a minute or so before he'd picked Dale up this evening. Maybe there was a chance, he thought fiercely. A bridge meant water. Water meant at least a faint hope of safety to him.

He put his head down, chin on his chest, and sent his legs literally flying across the macadam. The lead pair was only a couple hundred yards back now. He knew from the scale-climbing pitch of their howls that they would be on him in a matter of seconds.

He stumbled onto the bridge, gasping, and frantically hurdled the side wall. He fell into ink-black nothingness for what seemed half a minute, then stuck soddenly in oozy mud. He was up to his knees in stagnant, foul-smelling swamp water. He dragged himself drunkenly beneath the bridge and stood there panting, listening to the chilling clamorous onrush of those cursed dogs. He heard the swift thuck-thuck of their flying feet on the wooden pavement of the bridge above him.

Joe slid down under the slimy water, keeping only his head above surface level. He heard dogs stop abruptly above him. They were padding around up there in tiny circles, sniffing industriously, whining in excitement and exasperation at the scent that had disappeared so abruptly.

Joe hardly dared breathe as he listened. Finally one of the dogs yelped with anxious delight, and scurried on over the bridge, in the direction that Dale must have driven. The other hound followed.

A minute later the whole main posse went clattering across the bridge.

Joe heard the dogs' clamor, the men's gruff shouts diminish in the distance. He drew in his first deep breath in the relief of the moment.

When the posse returned, at a walk now, Joe was waiting right in the roadway to meet them. Somebody pinned a flashlight beam on him. A tall stern-faced man said, "Had a feelin' you'd turn up hereabouts, son. Your jalopy's down the line about a quarter mile, where this rascal left it." He swung the flashlight on a bedraggled figure. Harry Dale, wearing handcuffs and a surly expression.

Joe grinned. "You look natural, pal, wearing those bracelets. In case you're wondering how the dogs found you so easy, it was your topcoat."

Dale spat, "Nuts! You left it down the road, where I dropped you."

"Remember," Joe said, "when I jumped for the car? You were having too good a time shaking me off to see me hang that topcoat of yours on the bumper."

Dale snarled. "Give the boy scout a merit badge, sheriff."

"I figured if you could use me to lay down a phony scent for the hounds to follow, I'd at least give them a chance to follow the right one." Joe chuckled, as he went on to explain Phil's gimmick. Dale's fists clenched and he moved to strike at Joe's face. "You mean that gas tank ain't really empty!"

The tall, stern man said, "This swamp rat don't carry no bounty. But if there's anything we can do to oblige you—"

Joe grinned. "Might get my clothes off him. I'm on my way to New Orleans, to pop the question to a certain lady."

The tall man looked thoughtful. "How'd you like a police escort?" He chuckled. "Girl waitin' up, is she?"

"Sure is."

"Suppose you rolled up to her door in back of a couple of motorcycles, sirens awailin'. Sort of bring out what a hero you been, real graphic, and—"

"Whoa!" Joe protested. Then a broad smile crossed his face. "Well, maybe you have got somethin'. That might go pretty good with a woman."

"Might!" The older man snorted. "Why, son, you're good as engaged right now. Here—" he extended his hand—"let me be the first to congratulate you!"



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X-Ray Justice

(Continued from page 62)

lead itself, for the tiny, confined room was all one leaded box.

Leaded box! With a shout, Strom raised himself as far as he could, tried to kick the door open with a thrashing foot. It held. The lock on the outside had caught. He looked up swiftly, saw Fells' hand through the window reaching for the switch, saw it close on it, come sharply down.

Strom brought up the gun, pointed it directly at Fells through the glass and fired. The room echoed to the blast, as Fells, wide-eyed with terror, clutched his throat and sank to the floor.

Struck dumb, Strom glanced at the gun in his hand. It had barely chipped the six-inch thick glass. And Fells? Straining himself upward against the encroaching projecting plate, he could see the other flat on the floor, unbreathing, dead of heart failure, of terror as the bullet approached, harmlessly.

The room was silent, save for a faint hum.

Then Strom realized he was dead. As dead as Fells, as dead as the dead of two world wars. For the power was on and deadly rays were streaming invisibly through him as he lay caught, trapped in the coffinlike chamber beneath a fire-breathing monster that would drone on for hours, its teeth hurtling electrons, its life the hum of the transformers.

He knew what would happen when they shut off the power and came and found him. A few weeks of life—and then the hideous burns appearing while his flesh sloughed off and his brain turned to water.

Abruptly the room filled with thunder as he fired the gun wildly at the thick metal projector, fired at the enclosing glass walls.

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